

University of Dundee

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Material tensions

a practice-based study of the tension between the 'material' and the 'image' in digital moving image art

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Material tensions

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Emile Josef Shemilt

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MATERIAL TENSIONS

A practice-based study of the tension between the 'material' and the
'image' in digital moving image art

Submitted to the University of Dundee in fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

EMILE JOSEF SDEMILT

Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design

December 2010

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of the University or other institute of higher learning, except when due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

Emile Josef Shemilt

10th December 2010

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ABSTRACT

This practice-informed research is an exploration of the tension that exists between a representational image and the material of its construction in moving image art. In this thesis, I discuss the viewer's role in perceiving and sustaining the tension. In developing this research, I have created three moving image artworks in digital media.

Inspired by Jackie Hatfield's statement that 'the ascendancy of any one theory, history or lineage ... is due to the scarcity of writing relative to other art forms' (Hatfield, 2004, p.14), I describe this tension in moving image art in relation to the art forms of sculpture and narrative. Contemplating the viewer's *attempt* to perceive an illusion despite an apparent awareness of a work's material form; and discussing the viewer's *attempt* to perceive/construct narrative from a restricted number of elements; has enabled me to establish a background to the research. It is reinforced with reference to Peter Gidal's *Theory and Definition of Structural-Materialist Film* (1976) and his statements such as 'the attempt to decipher the structure and anticipate/ re-correct it ... are the root concern' (Gidal, 1976, no page number).

In further developing the viewer's role in perceiving and sustaining tension, I relate this concept to my own practice. As an artist, I am interested in the represented presence and absence of the human form. Inspired by my early practice as a sculptor, I discuss the viewer's perception of tension in relation to the tensions inherent in the materialist conception of being. I then develop this idea in relation to my three moving image artworks created to further this research. In this instance, I discuss the viewer's perception of tension in relation to the psychoanalytic process of 'projection' and discuss the conflict between what is *seen* and what is *perceived*.

To conclude the research, I discuss how accepting different elements from different directions is part of the creative process. As a way of emphasizing the viewer's role in perceiving tension, I use the final chapter of this thesis 'Developments on the Research' to argue the persistence of tension in other artworks.

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The dialectic of a [structural-materialist] film is established in that space of tension between materialist flatness, grain, light, movement and the supposed reality that it represents.

Peter Gidal (1976)

INTRODUCTION

Arguably, the tension that exists between the material and the image has been a factor in cinema¹ since the invention of film in 1889². As Ian Christie writes, with reference to the mechanical instruments of proto-cinema:

The 'impression of reality', regarded as cinema's distinctive feature, [distinguished] it from all other forms of artistic representation... Yet moving-image media have always relentlessly engaged in the 'spectacular demonstration' of their own premises (Lyons and Plunkett, 2007, p.16)

Despite being fundamentally a device engineered to represent reality through movement, Christie discusses how, even in its early form, cinema could be interpreted as art. This discussion is based on an argument that the mechanisms used to create the illusions of movement reveal their own characteristics that uniquely affect what is displayed. 'We are enjoined not just to admire' Christie states, 'but to recognize that cinema remains an art of illusion' (p.17). For Christie, the artistry of cinema is not simply in its capacity to re-present the world, but the *manner* by which it makes it possible. It is an appreciation of the mediation of transference that could be said to have reached its most conceptual during the 1960s and 1970s within the practices of structural-materialist film and media-specific video art. The writings of Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice especially, have articulated the artistic significance of discerning the relationship between the image and the material of its construction in experimental and avant-garde filmmaking; while, with reference to video art, David Hall has written of an artistic practice where an exploration of 'the parameters deriving

¹ Cinema is referred to beyond its everyday common definition of the moviehouse to include proto or pre-cinema (zoetropes, magic lantern etc) and post-cinema with the gallery or situation-specific installation. It also refers to the apparatus of cinema, the camera, filmmaking, recording, post-production, projection and display. The term does not refer to a single medium such as film, but includes video and digital technologies.

² If one goes by lineages of cinema that locate the origins of celluloid film (as we know it) to George Eastman in 1889; Thomas Edison's specification of the 35mm frame in 1891; and with the Lumière Brothers first private and public screenings of their 'moving pictures' in 1895. Although the Lumières' screenings are generally accepted as marking the birth of cinema, Mark Cousins argues that there was no sole inventor of cinema, and neither is there a specific start date (Cousins, 2004, p.22), pointing, for example, to one reel of film, shot in Leeds, England in 1888, by Louis La Prince. The film is simply titled *Leeds Bridge*.

from the characteristics of [electronic media]' can subvert our expectations of viewing video (Hall, 1978, no page number).

We know it is a facsimile of the world, yet we have adjusted for that in our desire to be informed – to have instant contact (albeit one way). Our preconceptions of what a TV set [for example] should give us are a direct result of what we have allowed ourselves to be conditioned to expect (Hall, 1978, no page number).

Subverting this perception, by concentrating on the mechanisms and characteristics that create the illusion, is a central concern of the conceptual thinking within this era of moving image art. And so, it is often the case that structural-materialist and/or media-specific works will exaggerate the intrinsic processes or structures that are necessary in sustaining the (traditional) cinematic experience. An example of this is in the perception of passing time. Within the conventions of mainstream 'movie' cinema, the passage of time is conveyed separately from the durational time that a movie will actually last for. While representing a time shift between shots can propel the narrative of a movie, a structural-materialist work might, for example, home in on the temporal rhythms and patterns produced when cutting to and fro between shots, or it may even introduce the repetition and looping of the same shot. Either way, represented time is drawn into comparison with its duration; and in establishing this relationship, the structural-materialist work invites its audience to contemplate their durational experience of viewing time.

This relationship between what is represented and the process of its manifestation has also been explored with reference to the materiality of cinematic media. An example is Peter Gidal's *Clouds* (1969). In creating this work, Gidal pointed his camera towards an overcast sky and filmed what drifted by. As the work is essentially a black and white close-up of some barely changing clouds, asking an audience to sustain their interest for the film's 10 minute duration, may seem like a tall order – especially as it is difficult to see anything beyond the film's grey texture. But for Gidal, this endeavor is an essential feature: 'I expect the viewer to work as hard as I do' he declares (Gidal in Du

Cane, 1972, no page number). The conceptual basis of his statement, being an indication that when the relationship between the image and the medium is established, it opens up a 'dialectic' between the viewer and his work. 'I [don't] want to set up a hierarchical event, where the meaning is complete in any sense' Gidal continues '[I want there to be] a constant dialectic, rather than a received statement or interpretation' (1972, no page number).

Within the first few minutes of the film, a small silhouette of an aeroplane appears in the lower, left-hand corner of the frame, before promptly disappearing again. At which point, Gidal's camera movements rapidly search the sky and we are reminded of the processes by which the image is produced. As we anticipate the plane's reappearance within the frame, we may well imagine Gidal himself, wielding the camera, while the world we watch spins across the screen. But it is also at this point that we become aware of the material aesthetic of the film. For example, we might observe how the different intensities of received light will sometimes darken, or sometimes lighten, the tones of grey that the medium creates in response to the reality it records. Similarly, we might notice how the movement of the camera's lens will stretch and belly any identifiable shape at the periphery of the image. As with Christie's assessment of the early cinematic mechanisms, we are presented not only with an illusion of the world, but also with the particular aesthetic used to create that illusion. As is typical of Gidal's work, the viewer is presented with an unremarkable image; but it is not the content that we are necessarily viewing, rather it is the actual aesthetic of film. In order to emphasize this in his work, Gidal exploits the inherent processes involved in its creation as a way of exaggerating the mediation of the image – almost to the point of abstraction. Importantly however, this mediation is never enough for the image to lose its identifiable form, and the clouds and the aeroplane remain recognizable throughout. The moment our perception shifts away from viewing the silhouette as a plane, and towards identifying it as a material effect, is the point at which, for Gidal, the viewer becomes engaged in the 'dialectic' with the work. However much, we may be seduced by the content imagery, it is also the visual patterns

and rhythms created through the filmmaking process that inform our reading of the work.

Related concepts have also been explored in video. David Hall's *TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane)* (1977), for example, explores the specificities of video as an electronic means of representation. Described as a 'confrontation with the illusionism of broadcast television' (O'Pray, 1988, p.62), *TV Fighter* details some archive footage of a low-flying fighter plane, attacking a railway train with its machine gun. Taken from the point of view of the fighter plane, or perhaps the gun, the footage is repeated several times. Although the work is presented on a video monitor, on first viewing of the footage, we are concerned primarily with the imagery rather than the manner of its presentation (i.e. we view it in the same way that we might view conventional cinema or television). At the point the footage is repeated a second time however, the viewer becomes aware of an artificial distance between them and the image. Appearing slightly out of focus and with its quality significantly reduced, it is apparent that Hall has re-recorded the footage through a video camera, which he pointed towards the screen of a video monitor/television. Hall emphasizes this, by appearing at the edge of the re-recorded image and painting a target on the screen of the recorded monitor. It is a process that Hall repeats several times, re-recording the re-recording. Each time, he paints a new target on the screen of a (new) recorded monitor. The presence of the camera is even emphasized, as Hall mimics the movements of the plane descending on the train – except in this case, the camera descends on the recorded monitor. For the viewer, this layering of imagery is compounded with their acknowledgement of the actual monitor upon which the work appears. Its physical presence and its own glass screen are factors of the work, and we cease to view *TV Fighter* in the same immersive way that might view conventional cinema or television. As Hall states:

TV Fighter (Cam Era Plane) attempts to decode the illusion/narrative convention as an intrinsic condition of the work
(Hall, 1977, no page number)

The significance of these works lies in their exploration of the relationship that can exist between the medium and the image although the abstraction of an image through the materiality of its medium is only one aspect of cinema-as-art. What I explore in this practice-led research, is the notion that a dynamic relationship between these two factors can provoke a sense of tension throughout an artwork. The essential reason for this dynamism is that these factors are oppositional in nature. When viewing traditional 'movie' cinema, the material components of a work's construction are usually suppressed. Even when one observes the aesthetic of a particularly beautiful shot or skillful edit, such cinematic processes are generally designed to be subsumed in the narrative. The accepted premise has usually been, that any overt reference to the movie's construction, could distract from the illusionary narrative. Similarly, when concentrating on an aesthetic artwork, the moment one becomes seduced by any content imagery – whether it is a form of narrative or documentation – attention can be drawn away from the experience one would normally associate with a physical object. In both cases, the potential dynamism of the relationship between object and the medium used to represent it has largely been avoided by making one subservient to the other.

In my own work, I am interested in the representational presence and absence of the human body – something that has been a central theme in my practice throughout my artistic career. Having originally worked in sculpture and installation art, I embarked upon this research with a particular interest in the relationships occurring between representational images and the materials of their construction. My curiosity in exploring this relationship through cinema emerged mainly from an interest in this apparent tendency to prioritize the illusionary content over a work's material form. And so, as with the concepts of structural-materialist filmmaking and media-specific video art, I undertook this research with the intention of subverting this tendency.

In this research I have created three artworks, each of them in digital video, and each of them inspired by the concepts of structural-materialist film and media-specific video art. At their core, is an exploration of the tension that can exist between the image and the materiality of the digital media used to create it. The

first work is an installation titled *Chamber*, which explores this tension on two levels. The most obvious of which, is through the use of a screen – a physical apparatus, key to almost any cinematic construction. With this work, the screen is suspended from the ceiling of a gallery space, and positioned at a distance from the walls. As a result, the work draws attention to its objecthood, and invites its audience to view it from different angles while they maneuver around its physical presence. Set in opposition to the screen is the projected image. What is immediately apparent is that the screen, which is tall and thin, is disproportionate to, and much smaller than, the aspect ratio of the projection. This means that the screen is illuminated by only part of the image, while the rest of the projected light spills onto the walls, the floor and/or the ceiling of the gallery space. Further to this is the use of a representational image – in this case a figure, which appears tightly pressed against the edges of the screen as though restricted by its defined proportions.

Like most forms of structural-materialist cinema, the basis for establishing a relationship between the screen and the projection is to subvert the viewer's tendency to perceive the content as the dominant focal point of moving image art. This set-up enables the viewer to contemplate the aesthetic of a cinematic construction by drawing their attention to the component parts instead – in particular the balance between the physical screen and the ethereal image. But as indicated above, there is also a desire to provoke a sense of tension that can occur beyond the aesthetic. In this work, this is something that is brought into focus by a digital glitch. As a form of materiality, characteristic of its media, a glitch (or digital artefact) occurs as the result of an error in the digital system. With *Chamber*, its effects scramble the image into groups of misaligned pixel values, which coincidentally distort the shape and form of the represented figure. The tension brought about by its occurrence is that it seems like a deliberate effect within the image. The scrambling of the figure is consistent with the constraints imposed upon it by the physical boundaries of the disproportionate screen, and as a result, meaning can be applied to the work – perhaps, a sense of inflicted pain or torment.

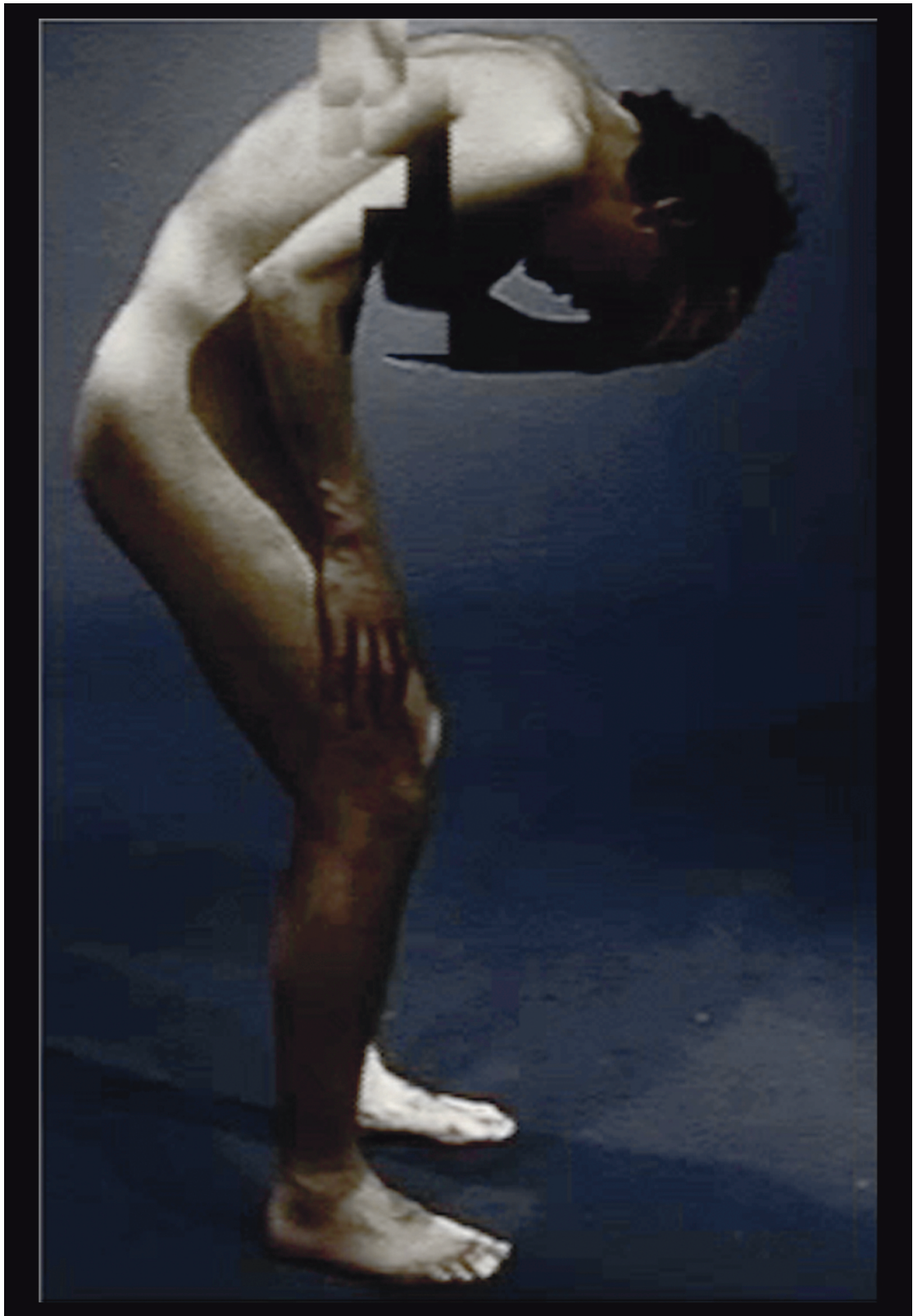


Fig.1 *Chamber* (2006/2007) Emile Shemilt

What is significant about this however, is the recognition that it is *not* a deliberate effect, but the coincidental after-effect of an error occurring within the digital system. As a way of provoking a sense of tension in the work, the acknowledgement of this coincidence brings into focus, not only a tendency to read the image as dominant, but also a willingness to apply meaning to something that is fundamentally material and lacking intrinsic meaning in itself. This is an important tension between the image and the material, and regarding this research it is one that interests me in particular.

I continue this line of thinking into the second work in this series, *Disjointed Momentum*. In this work, a series of figurative studies are horizontally aligned next to each other across three screens (projections). Initially, they appear as though they represent one continuous movement, similar to Muybridge's sequential studies of horses and people in motion, for example. But in fact, they do not represent a continuous movement at all. Although their linear arrangement would suggest some kind of order, in fact the images do not relate to each other, neither in progression nor in sequence. As a moving image installation, each image then starts to flicker at an individual rate. What is perceptible at this point, is that each flicker is the result of the images cycling through a series of other images – but again, the order is undefined, and any sense of coherence is entirely misleading. The final point of movement occurs as each strip of horizontal imagery (defined by the images' alignment on each screen) begins to move from side to side. But as is consistent with the lack of progression in the rest of the work, their movement is in opposite directions. A similarity between *Disjointed Momentum* and *Chamber* is that this lack of consistency in the work's movement, is not simply a constructed effect, but is partly due to the processes of its construction. In particular, it is due to those involved in the digital media's flow of information. This is because the work's creation involved deliberately loading too much information into a software program (one that is designed to generate movement) and recording the results as the program struggled to cope with the increased data rate during playback.

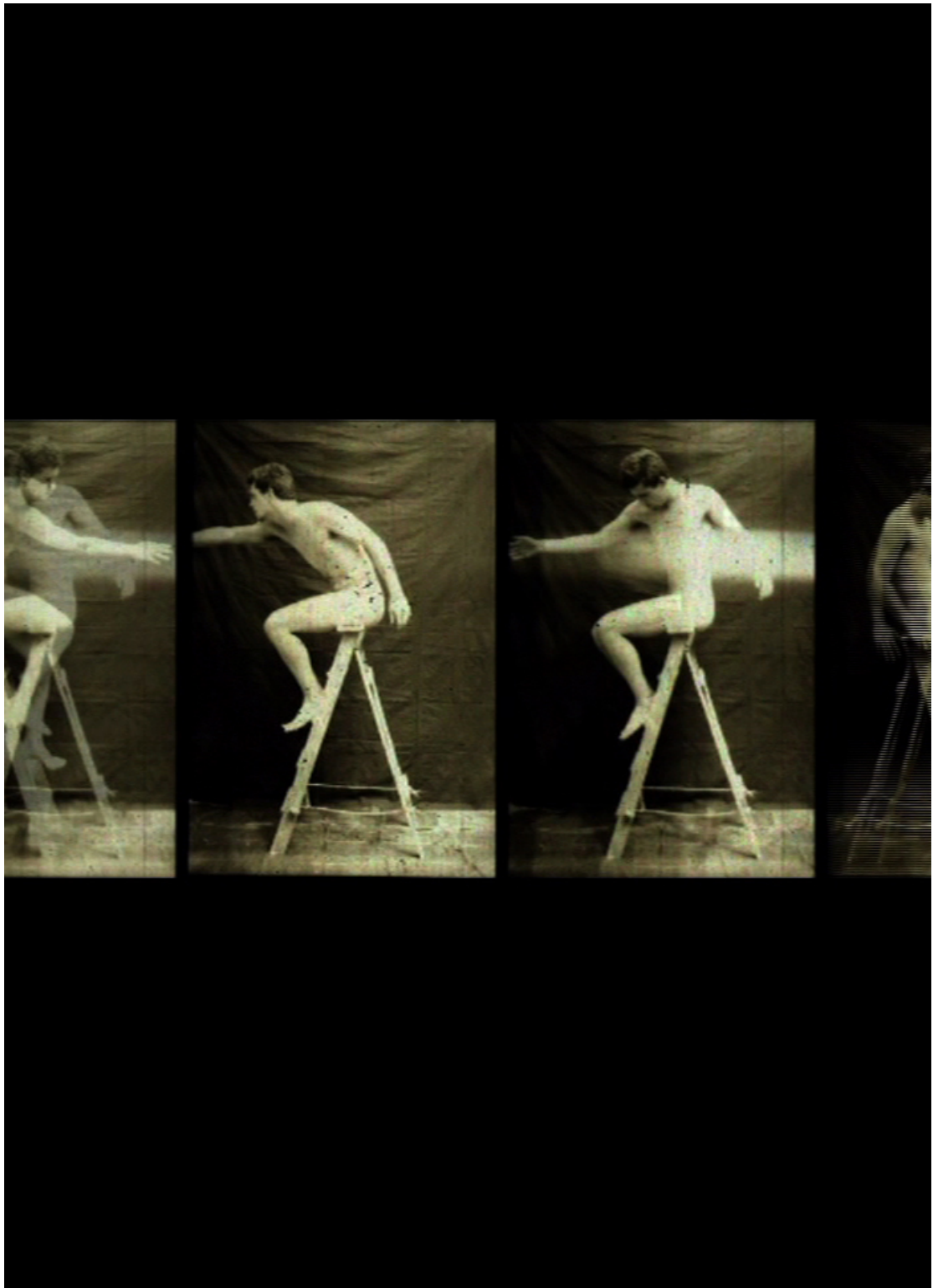


Fig.2 *Disjointed Momentum* (2007/2008) Emile Shemilt

The third work I made in this series is a digital video titled *Cortical Surfaces*. In some ways, *Cortical Surfaces* might be read as a combining of the concepts I have explored in *Chamber* and *Disjointed Momentum*. From *Chamber*, for example, the work adopts the effects created by the glitch, while from *Disjointed Momentum* it further explores the suggestion of movement in the material as well as in the image. A significant development in *Cortical Surfaces* however, is that it also introduces a use of cutting between several shots rather than maintaining the singular locked-off shot³ that I use with both *Chamber* and *Disjointed Momentum*. Regarding the content imagery, the work is also figurative, and it continues my own interests in the representational presence and absence of the human form. *Cortical Surfaces* depicts two figures, a male and a female, in an embrace. Each shot, taken from different angles, is a close-up on the figures as they move in and out of their embrace. The work then pushes this imagery, almost to the point of abstraction, by emphasizing the material effects exposed by misaligned pixels. It is a similar material effect to the one that occurs in *Chamber*, but where the misaligned pixels in *Chamber* are only momentarily concentrated to one area of the image, the distortion in *Cortical Surfaces* affects the whole image, and is prevalent throughout the work's duration.

As well as pursuing the tension between the material and the image, another conceptual focus of *Cortical Surfaces* is in an exploration of the tensions inherent in cinema's capacity to depict time independently from duration (in this way, it realizes the hypothetical example discussed above). The work provokes this tension by emphasizing representational time through the repetition, speeding up, slowing down and looping back and forth of the different shots. This exaggeration of representational time is then set in contrast with the durational time it takes for the material effects to occur and then disappear. It is a tension that is then made more complex with the recognition that the misaligned pixels are themselves a subversion of represented time. This is because a pixel from

³ P. Adams Sitney describes a locked-off shot as a 'fixed camera position' or a 'fixed frame from the viewer's perspective' (Adams Sitney, 2002, p.348). Adams Sitney is generally credited with coining the term 'Structural Film' in reference to the types of experimental filmmaking also referred to as Structural-Materialist Film. The locked-off shot is one of the four characteristics he associates with/uses to identify a structural film. The others are: 'the flicker effect, loop printing, and re-photography off the screen' (p.348).

the 700th frame, which appears on the 20th frame for example, embodies a further temporal misplacement within the work.

In the section discussing *Cortical Surfaces*, I refer to a major inspiration behind the work's creation: a film by Malcolm Le Grice titled *Berlin Horse* (1970). The influence of *Berlin Horse* on *Cortical Surfaces* is apparent, both from an aesthetic and structural point of view (both works cut between different shots that repeat, slow down, speed up and loop back and forth etc.), and also from a conceptual perspective. When describing *Berlin Horse*, Le Grice emphasizes the presence of the material and refers to a process he employed called 'solarization' (Curtis, 1996, p.110). The work is built from two separate reels of film, both of which depict a horse, and both of which Le Grice subjected to several 'darkroom' techniques. This included superimposing the imagery from one reel over the other. The 'solarization' process involved taking a negative reel of the combined footage and passing it through several colour filters. The end-result is a brilliant display of colours as bright reds and greens intermix with moments of blue and silver. By emphasizing this process, Le Grice draws attention to the 'continually changing 'solarization' image, which works on its own time, abstractly from the image' (p.110). This is a core concept in *Berlin Horse* and one, which I relate to *Cortical Surfaces*. The essential tension that this creates, is between the represented time suggested by the imagery, the repeating and/or slowed down shots, and the durational time occurring through the material effect, which as Le Grice points out, works in its *own* time.

With these three works, I have sought to continue the practices of structural-materialist film and media-specific video through digital media. From an aesthetic perspective, the works display how the unique characteristics of digital media can affect the representational image. But as I have already discussed, the abstraction of an image through the materiality of its medium is only one aspect of cinema-as-art. As with Peter Gidal's *Clouds* and David Hall's *TV Fighter*, a tension arises when the characteristics of digital media are used to subvert the dominance of the content imagery. Where the images were once ethereal and immersive, they are now viewed as material and objectified – and yet, they

remain identifiable, and because of this, still offer the potential to sustain an illusion.

In this thesis, I explore the origins of this tension and how it may be maintained in moving image art. In particular, I examine the tension between a representational image and the material of its construction. In doing this, I refer to the arguments of structural-materialist film and media-specific video. But I also widen the research and investigate the occurrence of tension in abstract moving image art (where a representational image is not present) and Expanded Cinema (an art-form relating to structural-materialist film and media-specific video, but which incorporates the use of multi-screen and performance). Because of this, the research turns to debates surrounding mid-20th century Abstract Art, in particular, discussions on minimalism and the writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Guided by my practice, I argue that this tension is essential to the creation of moving image art.

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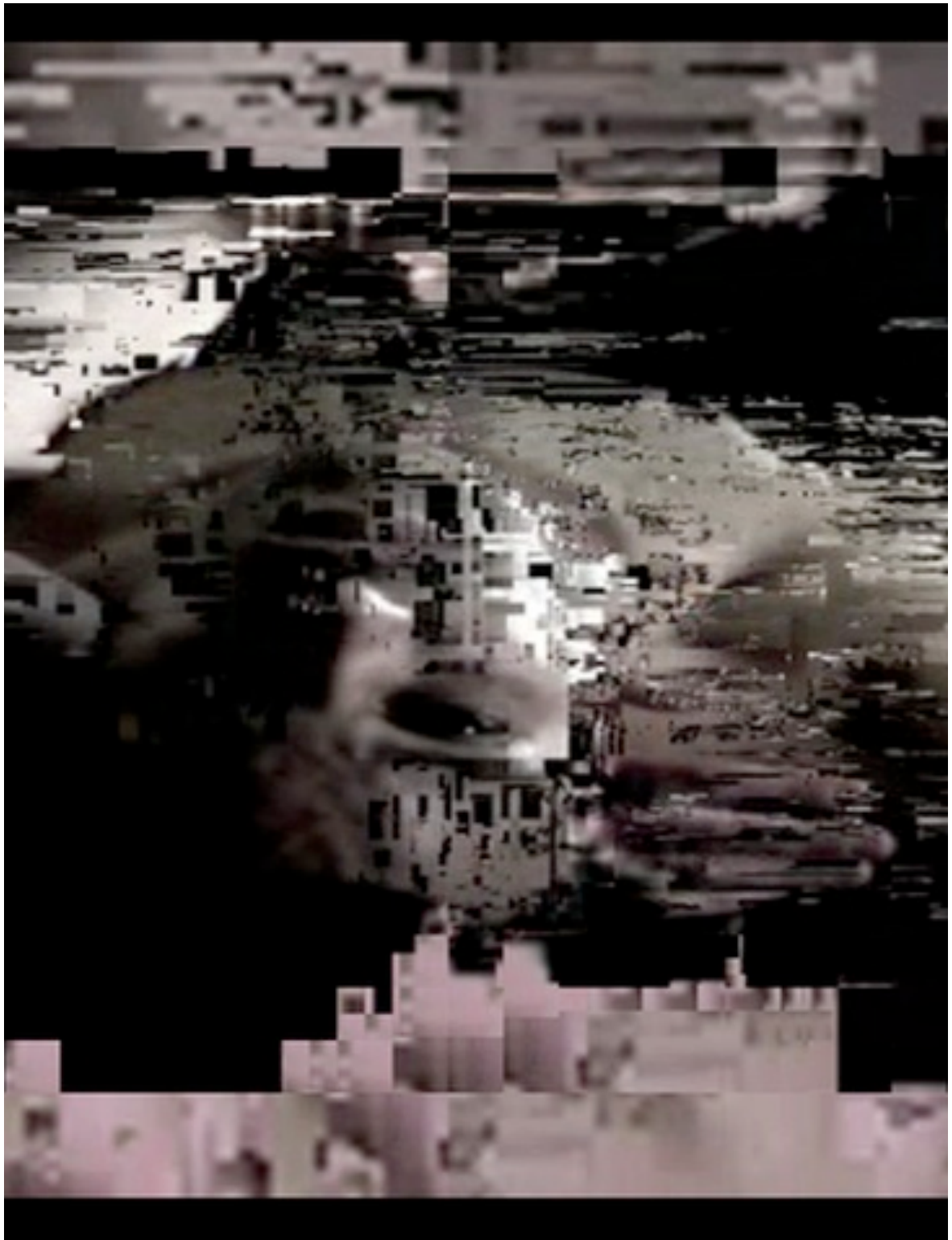


Fig.3 *Cortical Surfaces* (2009/2010) Emile Shemilt

THESIS STRATEGY

The argument that binds this research together emphasizes the viewer's role in perceiving tensions in moving image art. Guided by my own practice and informed by an examination of the theoretical and critical texts and the study of relevant artworks, the research stresses the viewer's perception as an integral factor in creating and sustaining the tension in moving image art.

The thesis is divided into four chapters: Background, Context for the Practice, Practice and Developments on the Research.

Background:

The purpose of the background chapter is to describe historical and current research relating to the tension between image and material in moving image art. The first section, 'Cinema as Art: The Tension' is primarily used to introduce, and explain the concept in more detail. The text draws from an analogy by J. Dudley Andrew, who describes the film process as a 'window through which we are able to see the world' (Dudley Andrew, 1976, p.31). Dudley Andrew's text describes the materiality of cinema in terms of light reflecting off the glass window, and indicates how this affects our view. I focus on the statement that 'we would never be aware of these qualities, if we weren't trying to look through the window' (p.31). Highlighting Dudley Andrew's emphasis on the viewer's *attempt*, I contextualize his analogy with a similar statement by Peter Gidal: 'the attempt to decipher the structure [and/or] process of the specific image and specific moment are the root concern [when viewing structural-materialist film]' (Gidal, 1976, no page number). It is by drawing these two texts together, that I confirm the significance of the viewer's role in sustaining the tension in cinema as art.

The second background section, 'Abstraction and Perception in Experimental Film' reflects upon the tension between a representational image and the material, and asks if it is still possible to perceive tension when the imagery of an artwork is abstract. In pursuing the notion that the viewer sustains the tension, I quote Malcolm Le Grice in his description of his own (abstract) artwork *Horror Film 1*. For Le Grice, something 'magical' happens when one views *Horror Film 1*,

and it is despite the fact that all the tricks used to create the work are revealed to the audience (Le Grice, 2008, no page number). By indicating that this perception of 'magic' can equate to the illusionary qualities of a representational image, I use this text to argue that it is still possible to maintain a sense of tension in abstract cinema. In support of this, I refer to debates held in the 1960s relating to abstract sculpture. In particular, I refer to Michael Fried's paper 'Art and Objecthood' (1967) and relate Le Grice's description of something magical occurring, to Fried's concept that an artwork should suspend its objecthood. I further develop my argument by returning to the viewer's role in sustaining tension and I suggest that the success of *Horror Film 1* is based on the viewer's (natural) desire or attempt to perceive an immaterial illusion despite their awareness of the work's material construction.

The third section in the background chapter is entitled 'Expanded Cinema and Narrative' and refers to the recent research project, 'Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema', based at Central Saint Martin's College of Art and Design, University of the Arts. In this text, I discuss the theoretical writing of the late Jackie Hatfield, who proposed the Narrative Explorations project in 2006. For her, the project represented an opportunity to merge the structural-materialist approach to cinema (including an additional emphasis placed on the multi-screen, the apparatus and the viewer's physical proximity to the work) with conventional cinematic languages such as 'dramaturgy, narrative and structure' (Hatfield, 2006, p.237). Relating Hatfield's proposal to my own interest in the tension between the material and the image in moving image art, I analyze and discuss the relevant debates that emerged from her project.

Principally, my text discusses the challenges posed by combining the structural-materialist concept with narrative: potentially two oppositional ways of reading cinema. But then, with reference to an argument put forth by Malcolm Le Grice (2008), I discuss the conceptual use of narration in cinema as art. Briefly put, while 'narrative' might be defined as a story, 'narration' can be defined as the telling of a story. Le Grice's distinction may seem over subtle, but it can provide a useful rule of thumb for practice. Narrative risks a return to the hierarchy of illusionary cinema, where any reference to the material will merely serve the

story. Narration, by contrast, is a structural process, and because of this, can be treated as something malleable. Conceptually, the process of drawing attention to the way a story is told, encourages the same sense of objectivity as emphasizing the material aesthetic of the cinematic media. Subverting a viewer's expectations of narrative through broken or out-of-sequence narration therefore, is consistent with the concepts of structural-materialism. A related paper I then refer to is Duncan White's *Degree Zero: Narration and Narrativity in Expanded Cinema* (White, 2009). In this text, White introduces the concept of 'narrativity', a third aspect, which 'prioritizes the activity of reception' (2009, no page number). He defines this after Robert Scholes who, describes it as:

The process by which a perceiver actively constructs [meaning] from the data provided by any narrative medium (Scholes in White, 2009).

The relevance of narrativity to my own research interests is in this emphasis on meaning created through the viewer's perception. I use this third background text to indicate how the concept of narrativity supports the argument that it is the viewer's *attempt* to construct meaning, which maintains the tension in a cinematic artwork.

Context for the Practice:

The second chapter in this thesis establishes the context for my own practice (which I discuss in the third chapter in relation to the role of the viewer). The first section of this second chapter, 'Perceiving the Material in Digital Media' is a text, which is primarily used in this thesis to give an insight into how digital media might be used to create artwork that explores the tension between material and image. The text is relevant to this research because it raises an important subtext: the notion that materiality does not exist in digital media in the same way that we might consider it in the tactility of a filmstrip or even a magnetic tape in video. When discussing my own practice (in chapter 3), I describe the processes used to emphasize the presence and significance of the media in the work. Therefore, a subtext to this research is to indicate potential ways in which one might perceive materiality in digital media. In doing this, I

refer to Malcolm Le Grice's text 'Digital Cinema and Experimental Film – Continuities and Discontinuities' (Le Grice, 2001), in which he argues that it is through digital media's 'processing' (of information) rather than their hardware or intrinsic aesthetic, that one can perceive a sense of materiality. Relating this back to the viewer's perception of tension in moving image art, I also indicate that in order for the tension to occur, the viewer seeks an insight into the process. As Dudley Andrew's window analogy stresses: 'we would never be aware of [the distortions, mediations and abstraction in the work] if we weren't trying to look through the window' in the first place (Dudley-Andrew, 1976, p.31).

The second text in this chapter is 'Material Tensions'. In anticipation of relating my practice to the viewer's perception of tension, I use this section to discuss my own personal reasons for exploring the issues, and indicate how my curiosity as a practising artist has led me towards developing it as doctorate research. Taking the view that it is useful to describe my relevant early practice as a sculptor and installation artist, I discuss some of the theoretical and philosophical influences behind my work. Specifically, I refer to a sculptural installation entitled *Residue* (2005), which is comprised of an early 20th century hospital bed with a mattress of thick, white fat spreading the length and breadth of the its frame. Referring to this work, I discuss my interest in the representational presence and absence of the human form and then examine the particular form of tension that *Residue* provokes.

As I indicate in 'Material Tensions', there are two powerful aspects of my personal life that have informed my interests as an artist. One of which is my relationship with my brother who is profoundly dysphasic – a form of brain damage, which has affected his ability to communicate. The other relates to a severe form of eczema that I suffered as a child. While some symptoms of this skin condition have been described as psychological, my brother's condition stems directly from physical damage incurred in the brain. Although *Residue* is primarily a work about infirmity, bodily decay and death, there is also an aspect to the work that refers to this human vulnerability in the brain. With *Residue*, I express an interest in the relationship between physical processes taking place

in the brain and what we construe as mental processes. It is an interest that extends beyond a basic sense of the body's physicality, and towards contemplating the mind as being circumscribed by the same physical laws as the material body. In relating this to the rest of the research, I draw a comparison between the philosophical ideas behind *Residue* and the theme of this thesis: the viewer as the perceiver of tension.

In particular, I discuss the physical, materialist conception of being – on the one hand, contemplating the body as a complex system of chemistry and electrical impulse, while on the other hand, I acknowledge the importance of the natural, human conception of the mind as something beyond the material. I do not attempt to escape from the materialist point of view that the mind cannot exist without the body, and that consciousness cannot exist independently from the electrical and chemical activity taking place in the brain. The tension between this materialist concept of being and our more intuitive concept of mind, may not be intensely felt in everyday existence but such realities as brain damage can be cruel reminders that any conception of the mind as existing beyond the material world must ultimately be an illusion.

Relating these issues to *Residue*, I refer to several tensions in the work, including the material itself. I discuss how meaning is implied as much through the material media used to create the work as it is implied through the imagery (notably the hospital bed). I also refer to an aesthetic tension made possible by the qualities of the fat. Essentially, I discuss how *Residue* provokes a number of associations by alluding to the body, while at the same time being a work that is scarcely representational of the body at all. I indicate, that from a materialist perspective, the work is simply a combination of a bed and fat; associations with our state of being are brought to the work by the viewer's perception of tension.

I develop this line of thinking in next section 'The Medium Personified'. In order to further develop this tension between what is viewed and what is perceived, I discuss the psychoanalytic theory of projection. Best described as putting one's own thoughts and feelings onto an 'external object', the process of projection is often an unconscious action. It occurs when we attribute our own feelings onto

another person as a way of imagining how they might be feeling. What is curious about this is that it reveals an inherent tension in the very process of perception itself. Given that we will never *truly* know how another person is feeling, the tension is exposed in our difficulty to maintain an objective interpretation. In psychoanalytic theory, this is referred to as ‘object relations’ – the basic concept being, that when we project onto something (or someone), it (or he/she) ceases to be an external object and becomes an internal object. In other words, the object we view is mediated by our perception (which may or may not be true or even real). Because of this, it is very difficult for us to maintain a sense of the *real* external object.

With this idea, I return to the debates surrounding abstract art in the 1960s. In particular, I refer to a form of art described by Lucy Lippard as ‘Eccentric Abstraction’ (Lippard, 1992) and a work by Eva Hesse titled *Ingeminate* (1965). Like *Residue*, *Ingeminate* allows for organic, bodily connotations. However, it is also an abstract, materialist form, and at no point, does the artist claim it to be otherwise. The significance of ‘Eccentric Abstraction’ is that it plays with this ambiguity. As Lippard states, ‘a bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus, a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol’ (Lippard, 1992, p.83).

In relating this concept to moving image art, I return to Peter Gidal’s *Theory and Definition of Structural-Materialist Film* (Gidal, 1976) and refer to his statements: ‘structural-materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist’ and ‘a continual attempt to destroy the illusion is necessary’ (1976, no page number). With reference to the process of projection, I argue, that it is in the viewer’s *attempt* to maintain an objective view of the work that sustains the sense of tension.

To illustrate this further, I refer to Gidal’s account of Andy Warhol’s 1964 film *Blow Job* (Gidal, 2008) – an artwork, which is a continuous shot of a man’s head and shoulders as he presumably receives fallatio. In his writing on the work, Gidal discusses a situation where the viewer imagines the film’s protagonist looking out, through the camera at us – the audience that *he* imagines will one day be there. A point that Gidal makes is that this situation (just like the act

seemingly occurring off screen) is something that we have no real evidence for. The only remaining truth is the material film.

Practice:

The third chapter in this research discusses my own work in relation to the psychoanalytic process of projection. I use this third chapter to indicate that the viewer's process of 'projection' is vital to the sense of tension in an artwork because it reveals a conflict between what is *seen* and what is *perceived*. The research contends that the tension is renewed through the viewer's process of identification. This occurs when the viewer projects onto (or identifies with, or empathizes with) not only the represented content of the work, but onto the medium/media as well. It argues that the materiality of an artwork's medium/media provides the inspiration for this process of identification.

With reference to the writings of Naomi Klein (1997) I discuss how this process of projection can relate to the way we view and interpret certain works of art – particularly when there is an apparent conflict between a representational image and a more material-centric, or abstract, reading of the work. In relating this to *Chamber*, I discuss how any meaning attached to the glitch is most likely the result of projection. I then draw attention to the coincidental nature of its occurrence, and allude to how recognizing this, can relate to the way one might attempt to remain objective when projecting onto another person.

Inspired by the structural-materialist tradition, *Disjointed Momentum* is a celebration of cinema's capacity to create an illusion of movement despite also being a work that purposefully draws attention to the processes behind its existence. In remarking on the sense of tension in the work, I discuss how the lack of progress in *Disjointed Momentum* subverts the viewer's anticipation for consequence. In relating this to the psychoanalytic concepts of projection, I return to the way we project meaning onto external objects and discuss how our apparent reluctance or inability to maintain an objective perception of the material can also result in the digital media's personification. In this case, I discuss how the lack of a forward progression in *Disjointed Momentum* enables

the viewer to attach a narrative to the digital system and its apparent struggle to process the flow of information.

In relation to *Cortical Surfaces*, I discuss Henri Lefebvre's description of 'Rhythmanalysis' (2004). For Lefebvre, time and duration are inextricably linked to cyclical rhythms that we experience throughout our lives – from the cycles of night and day, winter and summer, to the minutia of repeating patterns in our everyday existence. From a philosophical perspective, Lefebvre argues that our internal rhythmic cycles (heartbeat, respiration, circulation etc) inform our experience of duration - something that differs profoundly from our universal calculations of time (60 second in a minute etc). This is also something that mediates our perception of other rhythms, and in the process, our analysis of time and duration. When we internalize an external rhythm (i.e. make it relevant to our own individual existence) we do this by relating it to our own internal sense of duration. Consistent with the ideas explored through *Chamber* and *Disjointed Momentum*, I refer to *Cortical Surfaces* with an indication that the 'real' tension exists for the viewer and the perception of their own physiological and psychological objectivity.

Developments on the Research:

To conclude then, well beyond merely recognizing elements in what is displayed, the viewer plays a vital role in perceiving the tension between the material and the image in moving image art. I use this chapter, to argue the persistence of tension in other artworks. Works by the enigmatic Andy Warhol provided a challenging test-case for this integrative approach and allowed me to indicate developments which necessarily go beyond the scope of this thesis.

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METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach is a contextualization of theory and practice as means of articulation of the tension between the material and the image in moving image art. There are several intertwining methods to this. The first is through the study of existing works. These have been considered on their pertinence to the research, primarily if they provided an insight to the relationship between the material and the image. The works of structural-materialist film and media-specific video art are a particularly fruitful context for this, principally because of the ethos that leans heavily towards the tension between what is perceived and what is displayed in the work. A second method is through the study of critical texts and theories. Again, these texts have been measured on their relevance to the notion of tension between the material and the image. In correlation with the study of structural-materialist films and media-specific video artworks, the theories and critical texts that were produced at the time and/or in response to these works were especially considered. This method also involved the study of a number of recent texts that examine the works (and the previous theories) in retrospect. A third method involved attending and presenting at appropriate conferences and seminars as a way of encountering current debates on the issues relevant to the research. Through the contextualization of artworks, alongside theoretical and critical texts, and against current debates articulated at conferences and seminars, it became possible to establish the points of crossover and thereby, enable the construction of a theoretical backbone to the research.

A fourth method, but one of at least equal status, has been through the production of my own artworks. With practice as research, there is the space for process and experimentation as a test-bed for ideas and the development of techniques. Central to this method, however has always remained the question of tension between material and image. In response to the theoretical background established through the first, second and third methods; the practice poses the possibilities of creating artworks in digital media that explore a tension similar to that achieved in the practices of structural-materialist film and

media-specific video art. In this sense, the inspiration for the practical research has been the research gathered through the first, second and third methods.

A fifth method has been to introduce further concepts and influences that have inspired my practice, aside from those specified by cinema as art. This process has included reflecting upon my previous practice as a sculptor and installation artist. In contextualizing these personal influences against the practice created in response to the background research, this fifth method has enabled a further opportunity to consider the tension between the image and the material in moving image art. I consider this process of reflection integral to the research and use it as a way of providing a new insight as to the occurrence of tension, not only in my own digital media works, but also to a range of artworks from the structural-materialist and media-specific era. In other words, the research gathered through my own practical research, feeds back into my interpretation of the background research.

Regarding testing my theories, a final method has been the exhibition of my work, as well as the writing and presentation of papers at appropriate conferences and seminars, reflecting my research. These opportunities have allowed me to expose my research and engage in the resulting feedback.

RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

Undertaking a PhD in a discipline that is fundamentally visual and non-linguistic requires certain considerations when articulating the research. From a personal perspective, I consider myself to be, primarily, an artist. Because of this, my intention in studying for this doctorate level degree has been that the theory should advise, enable, enhance and/or refine my own practice. This may read like a perfectly reasonable ambition – one that, potentially, would support the creation of more cogent artworks. However, it is also an approach to academic research that has to confront certain problems. The most significant of these, relates to the problematic notion that the practical research can be articulated linguistically, and that likewise, the theoretical research can be represented visually. Being aware of certain criticisms: that often artists' theories 'turn out to be irrelevant to what comes to be taken as most important about the work', or if the work 'pauses to consider [notions or philosophies] outside of the [obvious] circumstances in which they [appear to relate]' (Elkins, 2009, pp.150, 151), the texts presented here, should not be considered as a smoke-screen for what the viewer perceives (or does *not* perceive) in the work. Rather, the circumstances of writing about a discipline that is essentially visual and non-linguistic, has meant that I have allowed space for other interests and inspirations, outside of those stated in the research aspirations, to still inform my creativity as an artist as well as contribute to my interpretation of the established theory. In this text, I have maintained their relevance to the research – even when their influence is not immediately apparent to the viewer. The ideal outcome, of course, would be that the reader/viewer would gain an insight to the concepts and philosophies that have inspired my practice, over and above those articulated in this research.

Because of this interconnectivity of ideas, I have elected not to present the research as a traditional thesis. Neither is it a form of art history, nor should it be treated primarily as art criticism, except in so far as the investigation into the artwork and concepts that nourished my aspirations for the research is directed towards my practice as an artist. The judgments I have made as an artist have perhaps had as much potential to determine my interpretation of the theory, as the theory has had to inform my practice. For this reason, the written

component of this research is presented as a collection of texts that interweave my understanding of the practice with my interpretation of the theory. Binding these texts together however, is always the same premise: the viewer's perception of tension between material and image in moving image art.

In reflection of Sean Cubitt's assessment of Malcolm Le Grice's 'Experimental Film in The Digital Age' (Le Grice, 2001) – also a major inspiration for this research – these writings are 'the voice of a journey... most of all, [they are the] traces of a mode of thinking whose ordinary practice has been practical' (p.viii). As Cubitt continues:

Mediation is the nature of our conversation as species, and though we mostly spend our time communicating – our passions, our ideas, our needs – we must also give a certain respect to the sheer fact of mediation, the obdurate materiality of our message-making (pp. viii, ix)

The mediation in this sense is the articulation of my own journey, guided by the interests and inspirations that have contributed to the creation of the artwork and the theoretical work presented here. From this perspective, the document can be interpreted as a chronology of my development as an artist and for this reason, can also be treated as complementary to the artwork.

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CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND

PREFACE TO 'CINEMA AS ART: THE TENSION'

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce and explain a particular concept of cinema as art and to discuss the tension that is at its core. Using an analogy articulated by J. Dudley Andrew of turning a glass window until light begins to reflect off its surface, the text indicates how the specific attributes of a cinematic medium are fundamental to this form of cinema as art (i.e. from one perspective, we simply view through the glass, from another perspective we notice that the glass has its own aesthetic qualities which affect this view). Stressing the sense of tension as the main concern of the research, this text discusses how the abstraction of an image by the materiality of its medium is just one aspect of cinema as art. As Dudley Andrew's analogy indicates, 'we would never be aware of these qualities if we weren't trying to look through the window' (Dudley Andrew, 1976, p.31) – this remark reflecting the argument that the representational aspect of cinema can still offer an interpretive basis for the art. Covering a very brief history of this form of cinema-as-art, the text refers to Man Ray's *Le Retour à la Raison* (1923) and Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) before introducing P. Adams Sitney's concept of Structural Film and Peter Gidal's *Theory and Definition of Structural-Materialist Film* (Gidal, 1976) – a text that is of fundamental importance to this thesis.

In 'Cinema-as-Art: The Tension', I stress the significance of Gidal's statement that 'the attempt to decipher the structure [and/or] process of the specific image and specific moment are the root concern' (Gidal, 1976) and indicate how this relates to Dudley Andrew's analogy of trying to look through the window. The significance of this text as a background to the thesis is to emphasize how the *attempt* is fundamental to sustaining the tension between the image and the medium.

CINEMA AS ART: THE TENSION

We might think of the film process as a window through which we are able to see the world. [Rudolf] Arnheim would have us turn this window at an angle until the glass begins to reflect the light, distorting what is beyond it while revealing its own properties. Suddenly we become aware of the frame, of the glass, of its texture, of the kinds of light it allows to pass, and so on. Nonetheless we would never be aware of these qualities if we weren't trying to look through the window. Film art is a product of the tension between representation and distortion. It is based not on the aesthetic use of something in the world but on the aesthetic use of something, which gives us the world.

J. Dudley-Andrew (1976, p.31)

J. Dudley Andrew's description of Rudolf Arnheim's writing on Film as Art (Arnheim, 2006) provides an indication of the artistic tension that is a central theme in this thesis. It is a description of a form of tension that occurs between the cinematic⁴ image (i.e. the represented content) and the physical, material 'apparatus' of cinema's production (e.g. the projector, the screen or even the celluloid or acetate filmstrip). As Dudley Andrew's description suggests, 'film as art' (or 'cinema as art' if we are to consider the use of more than one medium) is a very different concept to that of traditional 'movie' cinema. While we might think of conventional movies in terms of their capacity for sustaining a sense of narrative and/or documentation for example, cinema as art can be understood to have quite a different agenda. There are of course, a number of differing forms and genres of cinema that might be considered 'art' – from Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel's surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) to the notion of 'Independent' or 'Art-house' movies that range from the Nouvelle Vague to the Hollywood productions of David Lynch. From these variations of 'movie-art-cinema' to the histories of gallery-based moving image, which range from the film-performance related happenings of Fluxus to latter-day forms of interactive digital video

⁴ The term 'cinematic' is used in this text to mean 'of cinema' rather than other understandings such as 'like cinema' as in "that style of painting is very cinematic" etc.

installations, applying the term 'art' to cinema can have a varied definition. But, just as the the term 'avant-garde' is apt to seem ambiguous and in need of further explanation when it is applied to genres past as well as present, 'art as cinema' is also a concept that is essentially open to interpretation. The particular notion that interests me however, relates to this observation by J. Dudley Andrew. This is principally because his analogy of turning a window 'until the glass begins to reflect the light' describes a concern for the actual materials that construct the cinematic image, rather than echoing the more conventional concerns that are often dominated by the content of that image. In other words, while many of the above forms of cinema still aspire to tell a story (of sorts), this far from vague conception cinema's potential as art gives due recognition to the specific material attributes of cinematic media. And as Dudley Andrew's analogy indicates, 'suddenly [becoming] aware of the frame, of the glass, of the texture' (Dudley Andrew, 1976, p.31) alters our understanding of the moving image. Where these material properties have tended to be ignored, or simply recognized as a formal necessity in the construction of the ethereal narrative, they are instead celebrated in this form of cinema as art for their own unique aesthetic 'qualities'. In this way, cinema might be considered as an art form that has more in common with the plasticity of painting and sculpture than with the narrative-based arts (such as theatre or literature) that it is more commonly thought as. As Malcolm Le Grice states, even though 'the essential form and language of cinema evolved to tell stories' this was not an inevitable outcome. He claims that without the 'needs, priorities [and] social and economic pressures ... in a theoretical sense, there was no reason why the plastic arts – painting and sculpture or music – should not have emerged as the dominant formal basis for cinematic culture' (Le Grice, 1977 p.7). As he then indicates, some of the earliest examples of this more materialist approach to cinema could have been the films of Italian Futurists from the 1910s and 1920s. Even though many of the works are now lost, and information is sparse (Graf & Scheunemann, 2007), the emphasis that their manifesto places on exploring the moving image as a plastic art like painting or sculpture, reveals an interest in cinema not as a narrative based art-form, but as a medium appropriate for their modernist celebrations of

speed and technology. As this testimony from the 1916 manifesto, 'Futurist Cinema' explains:

The Cinema is an autonomous art. The cinema must therefore never copy the stage. The cinema, being essentially visual, must above all, fulfill the evolution of painting, detach itself from reality, from photography, from the graceful and the solemn. It must become anti-graceful, deforming, impressionistic, synthetic, dynamic, free-wording (Apollonio, 2001, p. 208).

Perhaps a more widely known early example of a 'plastic' interaction with cinema though, is Man Ray's *Le Retour à la Raison* (1923), which at its most fundamental, makes apparent the tactility of the actual celluloid filmstrip used in its creation. On various sections of the film itself, nails and pins have been photo-chemically exposed onto the celluloid's emulsion-based surface. In addition to drawing attention to 'the glass in the window' – to appropriate Dudley Andrew's analogy – when the film is projected, these sections of the filmstrip appear as abstract moving patterns of varying black, white and silver shades. In relation to the concept of cinema as art, *Le Retour à la Raison* is an artwork that celebrates the unique aesthetic of its own material components in a way that doesn't appear to adhere to any of the conventions of narrative cinema. And in doing so, can seem like a work that encourages an appreciation of a number of other artistic concerns. As Michael O'Pray suggests:

By placing tacks and nails and iron filings on the film-strip itself, Man Ray [also] furthered the idea of the camera-less film and asserted film's photographic qualities derived from the darkroom, creating a concatenation of black and white shapes *abstracted* from their naturalist-rendering by the traditional cinema. In this way, its spontaneity and refusal of [tradition] is subtlety grounded by an enthusiasm for shape, form, texture, light and movement (O'Pray, 2003, p.18).

So it is in contemplating the material of cinema like this – seeing it as a system of mechanical, chemical and/or electronic processes (when including video or

digital media) – that the artist and the viewer can experience not only the aesthetic of cinematic abstraction but also explore a range of other formalist concerns, equivalent to Man Ray’s apparent ‘enthusiasm for shape, form, texture, light and movement’, that might emerge from that abstraction. In this way, the properties that are revealed when the glass window is turned to reflect the light, are potentially much more variable than simply aesthetic. In Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) for example, it is not just the form of cinema that is celebrated but the structure of its composition as well. Created at a time when photographic film was still a relatively new medium, and while ‘cinema’ itself was barely 30 years old, Vertov’s film charts a discovery of the photographic medium’s potential for image making and the creation of visual effects. *Man with a Movie Camera*, which opens with a title-card reading ‘excerpt from a camera operator’s diary’, is a catalogue of camera trickery, processing effects and editing techniques that range from montage to superimposition. With regard to narrative cinema, there is no apparent plot in Vertov’s film, other than a celebration of the impressive spectacle that the practice of filmmaking is capable of producing. As ‘cinema as art’ then, *Man With a Movie Camera* can be seen as another example of turning and thereby seeing the glass window. Instead of just considering the material textures, which enabled the abstract patterns in *Le Retour à la Raison*, the sequences in *Man With a Movie Camera* are a succession of cinematic spectacles that are also self-referential and equate to the progression of the film itself. In recognizing this, *Man with a Movie Camera* is not just perceived as a film about a filmmaking, but rather a film about its own making.

It is through early examples of cinema as art like these works, that we begin to find the basis for what has come to be known as Structural-Materialist Film, a form of cinema that could be said to have reached the pinnacle of its output during the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, it was in 1969 when one of the earliest definitions of ‘Structural Film’ appeared in the United States⁵, when P. Adams

⁵ Even though he later cited the dominance of the American influence as being ‘powerfully challenged by several flourishing movements in Europe, especially in Germany and England’ (Adams Sitney, 2002, p. 371), his references on the whole maintain an American historicism of the materialist approach to experimental film. This is so much the case that the American avant-garde, post-World War Two, is often considered as the canon of materialist film (Rees, 1999, p.p.

Sitney coined the term with his publication of the same name (Dixon & Foster, 2002, pp. 227 – 237). His concept, which emerged in his wider account 'Visionary Film' (Adams Sitney, 2002), succeeds the earlier historical examples of cinema-as-art referred to above, by focusing on artists' use of the forms and structures of cinema to mark a significant development away from the traditions of narrative. With reference in particular to artists such as Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, Tony Conrad and Hollis Frampton; Adams Sitney emphasizes the reduction of the film process down to its most essential forms, and in doing so, describes a point in filmmaking's history when the philosophies behind the creation of experimental cinema reflected the Modernist developments of abstract painting and sculpture. As stated in the writings of Clement Greenberg:

The essence of Modernism lies in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize or engage the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence (Greenberg, 1995, p. 85).

Described as a 'champion of purity, simplicity and formalism' (Dixon & Foster, 2002, p. 225) Adams Sitney isolates four of these 'characteristic methods' that in his opinion, exemplify Structural Filmmaking as an artistic practice. The first is a 'fixed camera position', which he describes as a 'fixed *frame* from the viewer's perspective' (p.228). The second is the 'flicker effect', and the third is 'loop printing', which he describes as 'the immediate repetition of shots, exactly and without variation' (p.228). The fourth characteristic, added to a revised version of his text in 1979, is the process of 're-photography off the screen' (Adams Sitney, 2002, p. 348). It is through these characteristics that Adams Sitney describes Structural Film as 'Cinema... in which the shape of the whole film is predetermined and simplified' (p.348). 'There are no climaxes in these films' he explains. 'They are visual, or audio-visual objects whose most striking characteristic is their overall shape' (Dixon & Foster, 2002, p.236). This 'shape' he states, 'is the primal impression of the film' and 'what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline' (Adams Sitney, 2002, p.348).

72-75) and American artists such as Stan Brakhage are praised as 'the most important and... the most influential avant-garde filmmaker of the post-war period' (O'Pray, 2003, p.58).

One example of this 'shape' can be seen in the 'flicker effect' – a technique of editing, where the frames of a filmstrip have been spliced together into a specific order so that one frame follows another with a different image from its predecessor. This one-frame-at-a-time edit is repeated again and again, so that when the film is projected at 24 frames per second, a flickering effect occurs while the rate of alternating frames exceeds the viewer's persistence of vision. In discussing *Ray Gun Virus* – a 'flicker' work by Paul Sharits made in 1966, where the filmstrip is made up of alternating blocks of colour – Adams Sitney describes the piece as 'a calm look at the modulations of rapidly changing colour tones' (Dixon & Foster, 2002, p.236). The 'shape' of the work emerges when the rapid flickering results in the viewer perceiving a persistent tone as the separate colours appear to harmonize. Similarly, in another of Sharit's flickering works, *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* (1968), Adams Sitney specifies the extent to which the 'colours group in major and minor phrases with, say, a pale blue dominant at one time, a yellow dominant at another' (p.237). In interpreting the work, he theorizes 'the ultimate aspiration of Sharit's cinema... must be the synthesis of whiteness; because the natural effect of his blazing colours is a blending which will always tend towards a bleaching' (p.237).

So it is from this perspective that one can describe Structural Film as a 'return to the materials' (O'Pray, 2003, p.97) where the very mechanism of cinema's production including the camera, the processor and the printer denote an entirely formalist conception of cinema as art free from any associations with narrative or representation. As far as my own interests in this concept are concerned, they do not culminate here. As Dudley Andrew's analogy intimates, there is a further aspect to the concept of cinema as art, which invites an entirely different reading of these materialist effects. In his suggestion that 'we [wouldn't necessarily] be aware of these [material] qualities if we weren't trying to look through the window' (Dudley-Andrew, 1976, p.31), Dudley Andrew identifies a concept of cinema as art, which addresses the notion that a cinematic artwork, despite being a work that stridently emphasizes its material processes, might still (on some level at least) display the potential for a narrative interpretation. His subsequent statement that '[cinema] as art is a product of the tension

between representation and distortion' (p.31) indicates a reading of moving image art where both 'effects' of cinema exist in the same artwork – albeit in state of tension with each other.

The problem established by such a proposition, is that the effect of the material and the effects of more traditional experiences associated with conventional 'movie' cinema (which might be interpreted as the engrossing nature of the narrative, the sense of identification with, or attachment to, the characters and their situations, or more simply the thrilling experiences of suspense and surprise) are essentially oppositional. It is typical then for most narrative-led movies to depend upon the material components in their construction being disguised. This is because any overt attention that might be drawn to the materiality of the projector, the screen or the actual filmstrip would potentially undermine the viewer's sense of the 'illusion' that one would expect to be sustained through the movie's capacity for storytelling. If, as sometimes happens, a conventional movie audience find themselves staring at a misaligned projection, where only a portion of the image is detected on the screen and the rest spills out onto the ceiling or the surrounding curtains, a severance will often occur between the viewer and his or her relationship to the narrative action established by the 'movie experience'. Conversely, if this situation were to be treated as an artwork and embraced, (with this set-up seen as a way of drawing attention to the aesthetic refractions of light, the illumination of the differing textures between the wall and the screen, or the stretching and bellying of the image as the focal point is relocated along with the projection) then because the content imagery is representational (i.e. containing identifiable images of people for example rather than being something that is purely abstract) another, yet different, severance is at risk of taking place. This time, it is the sense of aesthetic appreciation that is potentially ruptured as the viewer is seduced by the narrative imagery instead.

This is perhaps a rather back to front way of describing the tension between these two forms of cinema, but if one considers Malcolm Le Grice's statement regarding 'a key feature of [his own] theoretical position':

The attempt [is] to stress the material conditions of production and viewing of works both as a creative basis of practice and as a strategy for the counteraction of narrative identification (Le Grice, 2001, p.235)

Accordingly, unless challenged, the narrative properties of cinema have the potential to dominate the experience or the interpretation of an artwork, which uses the medium of film. Le Grice argues that this dominance occurs when these narrative properties provide an immersive situation that offers no resistance for the viewer to act on. In this, Le Grice expresses an important distinction between movie cinema and cinema as art, a distinction based around the activity of the viewers and their 'state' of viewing. For Le Grice, cinema as art 'demands or encourages a more conscious or self-aware spectator (Le Grice, 2001, p.175)' than that of traditional movie cinema, which he regards as a 'spectatorship of 'manipulated passivity' (p.175). This reasoning is entirely consistent with Dudley Andrew's expression of a '*tension*' that occurs between the representation and the distortion in an artwork and, in my view, helps to articulate an intriguing conceptualization of cinema as art. We have a situation where neither the materialist approach nor the illusionary approach to cinema can be perceived to hold a necessary dominance over the other and the suggestion of a dynamic situation where both experiences might be located within the same work of art, even remaining inextricably entangled in some form of permanent conflict.

As previously discussed, another particularly influential polemicist on this issue is Peter Gidal. His writing on this concept (principally with regard to film) concurs in emphasizing the importance of this sense of tension, stating that 'the dialectic of the [artwork] is established in that space of tension between materialist flatness, grain, light, movement, and the supposed reality that is represented' (Gidal, 1976, no page number). In his description of this sense of tension, Gidal also accentuates the activity of the viewer – indicating that it is in their 'attempt' to decipher this tension that the artwork becomes fully realized:

The structuring aspects and the attempt to decipher the structure and anticipate/re-correct it, to clarify and analyze the production-process of the specific image at any specific moment, are the root concern (Gidal, 1976, no page number).

Gidal emphasizes, particularly, that this sense of 'tension' (and thereby the 'attempt') is something that should not be resolved, and that an artwork should ideally seek to maintain this sense of conflict between the two experiences, stating that 'a continual attempt to destroy the illusion is necessary' (1976). Another important point that he makes, however, is to emphasize the difference between maintaining this sense of tension and yielding to the temptation to allow the spectacle, or the effect, to be the sole focus of the work, for example by resolving its transformation. For Gidal, this would (re)-introduce a form of narrative into the work which, in Le Grice's terms, would restrict the activity of the viewer to spectatorship. His statements that 'the specific construct of each specific [artwork] is not the relevant point' and that 'one must beware not to let the construct, the shape, take the place of the 'story' in narrative film' (1976) both indicate the importance of sustaining the suspense in the tension, or else – as perhaps has become the case with some digital effects – the content will only serve as a celebration of its own trickery. 'This is an absolutely crucial point' Gidal states:

[Otherwise] one would merely be substituting one hierarchy for another within the same system, a formalism for what is normally called content... Through the usage of specific filmic devices... one is forced to attempt to decipher both the film's material and the film's construct... The attempt is primary to any specific shape, otherwise the discovery of shape (fetishising shape or system) may become the theme, in fact, the narrative of the film (Gidal, 1976, no page number)

And so it is with this in mind that we return to Dudley Andrew's analogy, and his final sentence: '[cinema as art] is not based on an aesthetic use of something in the world but on the aesthetic use of something which gives us the world'

(Dudley Andrew, 1976, p.31)⁶ because cinema as art is not simply a celebration of the technology's material effect but it is also an art-form that is capable of challenging the conditioning that we may have been exposed to in relation to the moving image. The work of these theorists, encourages us to focus on the artistic tensions that occur between the image and the material, between the representation and the aesthetic, or between the viewer's experience and their perception. And it is from this perspective that my own research, and this thesis, emerges.

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⁶ Regarding the film theory of Rudolf Arnheim, to whose writing Dudley Andrew's analysis refers, *Film as Art* was first published in 1933 and focused predominantly on the early use of film as it gradually become more and more affiliated with the movie tradition. His writings predate a number of the more well known avant-garde theories that emerged during the 1960s and 1970s with the rise of abstract and experimental film, and although Arnheim is perhaps less concerned in stressing the significance of this sense of tension than either Malcolm Le Grice or Peter Gidal, opting instead, to campaign for a use of cinematic media that recognizes the differences between the 'photographed' object and the reality of that object 'in the physical world' (Arnheim, 2006, p.34), Arnheim's writings on the creative specificities of the film medium can be seen as important antecedents in the canon of moving image art and theory. For example, it is in his text *The Making of a Film* from 1933, that he states:

In order that the film artist may create a work of art, it is important that he consciously stress[es] the peculiarities of his medium. This, however, should be done in such a manner that the character of the objects represented should not therefore be destroyed but rather strengthened, concentrated and interpreted (Arnheim, 2006, p.35).

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PREFACE TO 'ABSTRACTION AND PERCEPTION IN EXPERIMENTAL FILM'

As indicated in the previous section, one reason why the tension occurs between the image and the material of the medium is that they provide oppositional ways of reading the work. One problem arising from this observation however is that it provides a theory that is only fitting for those structural-materialist works where the imagery used is (in some way at least) representational. There are numerous works of cinema-as-art where a representational image does not exist. Although the aspirations regarding my own practice are to create works that *do* involve a representational image, it is important nonetheless, to question how a non-representational structural-materialist work might be said to maintain this sense of tension (since such work does not apparently provide an opposition to the materialist reading of the work). The reason for addressing this is in order to isolate any patterns that might exist between the representational definition of cinema-as-art – as articulated by J. Dudley Andrew (1976) – and any statements that could be said to explain the tension in non-representational structural-materialist works.

My second background text refers to Malcolm Le Grice's description of his work *Horror Film 1* (1971) and his assessment that 'something magical' occurs in the availability of all the components that construct the work (Le Grice, 2008); he deduces that this description can be interpreted as an expression of tension. How such tensions arise and are maintained is fundamental to my research. In probing the principal question that this background text asks, (i.e. how is it that this particular tension can be argued to exist in a non-representational structural-materialist work?) I explore three factors:

- The role of the artist in providing a necessary narrative in the viewer's reading of the work.
- The elevation to prominence of the material as an influential factor in the interpretation of the work (which raises the question as to whether the 'magic' that Le Grice describes is something inherent within the work itself).

- The activity of the viewer as the perceiver of tension.

In order to explicate how these factors relate to the occurrence of tension, I refer to certain debates conceptualising abstraction in 1960s modernist painting and sculpture – in particular, writings by Clement Greenberg, Donald Judd and Michael Fried. And it is with reference to Michael Fried's notion that an artwork should suspend its 'objecthood' (Harrison & Wood, 1992, pp. 822-834) that I identify a notion that is consistent with Le Grice's description of *Horror Film 1*. Because it occurs in the viewer's *attempt* to perceive something more than the materiality of an artwork, I surmise that it is the viewer's inability (or reluctance) to remain objective, which forms the basis of the tension between the material and the perception of an illusion in non-representational structural-materialist cinema.

In context with the previous section, this conclusion that there is an attempt to perceive an illusion (despite the availability of all the components) mirrors Gidal's statement that the 'root concern' of structural-materialist film is the attempt to decipher the process that the work embodies (Gidal, 1976). Even though these statements may read as oppositional (in the sense that the attempt to perceive the illusion assumes that the viewer can already identify the process; while the attempt to decipher the process assumes that the viewer is already seduced by the illusion) they are both essential to my argument (and to my art). Paradoxically, it is the opposition that produces the interplay between the two. Considering both of these apparently opposed statements, the conclusion emerges that *both* attempts are necessary in order for there to be tension perceived and maintained in the artwork. What remains consistent throughout is the viewer's *attempt* to perceive in each way. This is a fundamental observation in my research.

ABSTRACTION AND PERCEPTION IN EXPERIMENTAL FILM

At the 2008 BFI Southbank conference 'Expanded Cinema – The Live Record', Malcolm Le Grice presented documentation of his 1971 artwork, *Horror Film 1*. It is a work, which has been categorized as a part of the Structural-Materialist Film movement, as well as falling under the banner of 'Expanded Cinema' (White, 2008). In its original format, *Horror Film 1* is an amalgamation between a performance and a film installation, which consists of three film projections and Le Grice himself, acting as the performer. Each projection displays a film-loop of alternating colours and is focused towards the same, single-screen receiving surface. The projectors are positioned in such a way that the three projected rectangles of alternating colour-tones and opacities, partially over-lap each other, creating what Le Grice refers to as a 'parallax' effect (Le Grice, 2008). Moving between the projectors and the receiving screen is Le Grice himself – his body physically impeding the crossing beams of light. As he raises and lowers his arms, his shadow forms a range of shapes that trace the edges of the overlapping projections. Where the three projections meet, the differing colours from each sequential filmstrip blend through series of varying tonal ranges, which are further accentuated by Le Grice's body acting as a reflective surface. Similarly, the presence of his cast shadow allows more tones to bleed into the palette as the receiving screen reflects and absorbs the affected light-waves from the three projectors. During the screening of this documentation, Le Grice spoke of one the areas that interested him with this piece:

For the spectator in the space, everything that was going on in this work, including the film-loops and the presence of the projectors, was available to them. There was nothing that was hidden. There were no hidden components and there was no pro-filmic event, except for putting the colour onto the film. So the complete material of the action was available to the audience in the period of the performance. Yet, in that availability of all the components, something becomes magical. (Le Grice, 2008)

This description is an indication of another conceptual tension that has propelled structural-materialist practice. Again, it describes a situation where the audience is aware, even encouraged to be so, of the formal components and devices that construct the cinematic experience – the heart of the argument still being that structural-materialist filmmaking would celebrate cinema as a conceptual and aesthetic material process, rather than as a device for storytelling. But what is also interesting about this articulation of the structural-materialist concept is the idea that there is also an attempt to create something ‘magical’. This is a curious statement by Le Grice, because it essentially describes a paradox. When we think of magic, we might think of something beyond any reasonable explanation, and yet structural-materialist filmmaking, despite openly revealing its tricks, purports nonetheless to be a practice that maintains the same allure as if its mystery were still intact. This raises a number of questions regarding abstract art and how it is that a tension can still be argued to exist in a materialist artwork like this, especially when the imagery is non-representational. It is a line of questioning that echoes many of the debates surrounding abstract art in mid-20th century, and is something that Le Grice implies in his 1977 publication *Abstract Film and Beyond*, when he suggests that in its early development, photographic film could have been used as a materialist medium (Le Grice, 1977, pp. 7-16). His thesis, which in part, historicizes a formal approach to film by relating it to the histories of Impressionist Painting (and its gradual rejection of representation towards abstraction) makes reference to Monet’s series of over twenty paintings of Rouen Cathedral where ‘focus on the effects of different lighting conditions, at different times of day, was made possible by the consistent subject matter’ (p.7). At first, Le Grice draws a comparison between painting and the exposure techniques of photography with reference to the emulsion’s photochemical reaction to light. However, he then counters this argument by suggesting that:

In an Impressionist painting, the subject of the observation is not simply the light falling on Rouen Cathedral. Both the material constraints of painting – colour, pigment, canvas – and the artist as

a perceiver and organizer of his sensations significantly effect the 'impression' which is the residue of his labour' (pp. 9, 10).

Although it is somewhat short of embodying Harold Rosenberg's romantic description of an abstract painter at his canvas: '[the] arena in which to act, rather than a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyse or express an object, actual or imagined'⁷ (Harrison & Wood, 1992, p.581) Le Grice's position on abstraction, could be said to echo this argument. In this context, what appears to be an important factor for Le Grice is identifying the abstraction as a form of mediation by the artist. In the case of Monet's paintings, it is the artist's personal perception of the cathedral that dictates (or even limits or exaggerates) the impression. This may seem like a fairly obvious statement to make, but when making comparisons with the processes involved in filmmaking, such freedom of expression for the artist is limited by the technical constraints of the medium. The conception of the artist in complete control of his media is naïve, and needs to be tempered by consideration of the necessary processes, mechanical and chemical. This reflects a fundamental argument in the history of abstract art, and raises the question of the role of the artist as a provider of necessary narrative in the viewer's reading of the work.

At its most extreme abstraction had been used by a number of artists in the mid-20th Century to eschew representation and association altogether: their ultimate goal being the elevation to prominence of the material as *the* influential factor in the interpretation of the work (rather than the representational image or the artist's narrative per se). Some of the purest forms of abstraction in painting could be said to have happened through the De Stijl movement after the Second World War for example. The geometric paintings by artists like Mondrian epitomized the theoretical positions that were held regarding this negation of anything representational or associative in art. Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, in his text: *In Defence of "Abstract" Art* (1945) for example, stated that 'it is only the relationship between visual elements, and not the subject matter, which produces visual structure with an intrinsic meaning' (Moholy-Nagy, 1945, p.74).

⁷ This is an outlook that deems abstraction not so much a 'picture but an event' (p.581) and in the process loads it with a narrative of the heroic artist at work

He describes this intrinsic meaning as ‘a peculiar form of visual articulation, [lying] mainly in the integration of the visual elements, in its *freedom from the imitation* of nature and the philosophy connected with it’ (p.74). But perhaps the most extreme articulation of an anti-impressionistic/anti-narrative conception of abstract art came in 1965, when Donald Judd, a leading figure in what would later be termed Minimalism, produced a paper titled ‘Specific Objects’ (Harrison & Wood, 1992, pp. 809-813). In this essay, Judd articulated his desire to do away with anything representational, associative or illusionistic in art – arguing for what he called ‘specific objects [in] actual space’ (p. 809). It was a kind of what-you-see-is-what-you-get attitude that celebrated abstraction for its formal and aesthetic purity – something that should be isolated from any representational or associative narrative. The coloured and geometrically aligned machine-finished cubes and cuboids that typify Judd’s work for example, are arranged in series or in ways that produce a repeating image, so that, as David Hopkins describes, they are: ‘structurally self evident and pragmatically ordered according to a principal of ‘one thing after another’, thereby shaking off [any] fussy ‘relational’ characteristics’ (Hopkins, 2000, p.136). ‘My things are symmetrical’ Judd explains, ‘because I wanted to get rid of any compositional effects, and the obvious way to do it, was to be symmetrical’ (Battcock, 1995, p.150). But for Judd, even emphasising the specificity of a ‘real’ or ‘literal’ space was enough of a statement against the trappings of illusion. In this way, everything that was interesting in a work could be surmised as a form in its ‘whole’:

[An artwork] is made according to complex purposes, and these are not scattered but asserted by one form. It isn’t necessary for a work to have a lot of things to look at, to compare, to analyze one-by-one, to contemplate. The thing as a whole, its quality as a whole, is what is interesting. The main things are alone and are more intense, clear and powerful. They are not diluted by an inherited format, variations of a form, mild contrasts [or] connecting parts and areas (Harrison & Wood, 1992, p. 813).

Regarding abstraction, Judd would have it that the 'shape, colour, image and surface' of a work are all perceived as *one* (p. 813). This way, the art is specified as *this* 'specific object' in *this* 'specific space'. As a result, the work's dependence upon anything other than what is presented to the viewer is removed – including any trace of the artist as mediator (something that Judd would further emphasize by having his work manufactured in factories) and in the process insisting on an impersonal, objective and self-sufficient conception of the work. In a similar sense to *Horror Film 1* though, Judd's work can still be argued to explore the visual effects that its material produces. The assemblage of differently coloured sheets of metal, plywood or Plexiglas for example, reflects Moholy Nagy's conception of the integration of visual elements – even if it is the 'whole' form as a collective balance that is to be perceived. But unlike Le Grice's conception of something 'magical' occurring, the severity of Judd's more materialist attitude suggests a reluctance to perceive any sense of mystery in the objects at all. It was only the literal form of the works that was of interest to him. Philosophically perhaps, this is because it attempts to ground the works in the reality of the physical world. All the visual effects that the works reveal are the result of circumstances inherent in the materials – from a sharp glint on the corner-edge of metal box to a subtle shimmer on a semi-transparent surface. Such is the case that his emphasis on the perception of the work as a 'whole' belies a fundamental curiosity in the aesthetic reality of the material environment in which the work exists – from the conditions of the light to the proportions of the room. And it is from such a perspective as this, that any notion of the artist's narrative or personal intervention remains superfluous. Judd appears to pivot away from the mediation of the artist, towards the materiality of the media used in the work's construction. If we followed Judd we would have to ascribe the 'magic' that Le Grice recognised as essential to something inherent in the relationships contained within the work itself. It is a theoretical position that might even seem to harmonize with the writings of Clement Greenberg:

Art in any medium, boiled down to what it does in the experiencing of it, creates itself through relations, the quality of art depends on inspired, felt relations or proportions as on nothing else. There is

no getting around this. A simple, unadorned box can succeed as art by virtue of these things; and when it fails as art it is not because it is merely a plain box, but because its proportions, or even its size are uninspired, unfelt. The same applies to works in any other form of “novelty” art: kinetic, atmospheric, light, environmental, “earth”, “funky” etc., etc. No amount of phenomenal, describable newness avails when the internal relations of the work have not been felt, inspired, discovered. The superior work of art, whether it dances, radiates, explodes, or barely manages to be visible (or audible or decipherable), exhibits, in other words, rightness of “form” (Greenberg, 1995, pp. 300, 301).

Originally published in 1969 however, this statement is probably to be read as a riposte to Donald Judd’s ‘Specific Objects’. In 1967 he had already likened Minimalism to a ‘novelty’ and a ‘continuing infiltration of Good Design into what purports to be advanced and highbrow art’ (p.256), but the exception that Greenberg seems to take to Judd’s concept is arguably to do with the notion that art is something inherent within the material itself. Although much of Greenberg’s writing on this topic is haunted by qualifying (or sometimes challenging) a modernist pursuit of ‘newness’ or debating the relevance of ‘high’ or ‘low’ art, Greenberg consistently argues that the success of an artwork should be based on its capacity to provoke a ‘felt’ reaction. This may not be surprising given his significant support for Abstract Expressionism through the 1940s and 1950s, but what is notable is that Greenberg also argues that this ‘felt’ reaction is ‘relational’ and depends on ‘inspiration’ (pp.300, 301). For Greenberg, the sense of inspiration is what makes an artwork successful rather than just another material object or ‘unadorned box’. His criticism of the impersonal is based on the modernist argument that without a sense of inspiration, the *quality* of art is significantly diminished. With Abstract Expressionism – especially the works of Pollock or Rothko for example – an artist’s sensibility for the medium is evident in the gestures that dictate the application of the paint. Although from a conceptual perspective, such works deal with pictorial form: the flatness of the canvas and its (often) rectangular dimensions that determine the shape(s)

within the shape, and/or the order that emerges through refining the distinctions between 'painterly' brushstrokes and 'non-painterly' drips for example, as well as the possibilities for colour as hue etc, for Greenberg, the success of an abstract work owes more to the artist's 'inspiration' than 'method' (p.246). Anyone, with skill and practice, he argues, can mimic Pollock's drip technique, but his 'quality can no more be duplicated than Leonardo's or Rembrandt's' (p.248). Without 'inspiration', Greenberg claims, the 'discipline, learning, awareness and the conjuncture of circumstances' that propel the conceptual development of abstraction 'are as nothing' (p.248). Stating that the 'sublime' in art is troubled by a 'genetic flaw' in that its effects can be 'concocted' i.e. 'produced without inspiration', Greenberg argues that the 'aesthetically extrinsic, merely phenomenal or [conceptually difficult]' do not offer enough alone, to 'dodge qualitative comparisons' (p.302, 303). Even the Milky Way, he claims, becomes banal when it is treated as art (p. 303). His reasoning is that when 'viewed strictly as art, the "sublime" [will] usually reverse itself and turn into the banal' (p.303). And it is predominantly from this perspective that he opposes Judd's materialist and impersonal concept, as susceptible to making 'banal and trivial' work (p.303).

Despite heavy criticism levelled at Greenberg's legacy, notably by Robert Storr who condemned it as 'idealistic' and at risk of '[depriving] subsequent generations of their true intellectual heritage' (Varnedoe & Gopnik, 1990, p.161), Greenberg's writing, in relation to Judd's concept of the impersonal, bears relevance to this research because both ideas can be interpreted as polemic arguments in the debate surrounding material-based abstraction. In historical terms, the eclipse of Greenbergian theory in art, is generally recognised as having enabled the rise of movements in Pop Art, Minimalism, Conceptual Art and Fluxus among others where 'the bodily, the ready-made, the mass-(re)produced, the 'kitsch' and the aesthetically hybrid' (Hopkins, 2000, p.131) returned to the forefront of conceptual thought. In principal, these Post-Abstract Expressionist movements are recognised as having challenged Greenberg's notions of an 'inspired' high and low art, but what is perhaps also significant, is that their prominence in abstract art theory appeared to re-conceptualise the

location of this 'inspiration'. At first, the debate subtracted the narrative of the artist, but later raised doubts over the tension inherent in the material alone. The question of how an artwork might be understood to create a sense of magic – despite displaying all its component parts – turned instead towards the role of the viewer.

As the common factor in (perhaps) any artwork, the viewer's perception of abstract art can be identified as the bridge between Judd's conceptualisation of abstract art as self-sufficient and Greenberg's insistence that an artwork must be inspired. In this sense, Greenberg's notion of 'inspiration' can be relocated with the viewer and this concept supports the perception of an artwork as an independent materialist object, while it also conceives a reverence for it as somehow transcendent from the material world. The tension is then in the recognition that the viewer's perception is subjective and that the success of the 'art' is entirely relative to the will of the 'beholder', leading Greenberg to muse that 'almost anything today is readable as art – including a door, a table or a blank sheet of paper' (p. 253).

Particularly relevant to this discussion is Michael Fried's 'Art and Objecthood' (in Harrison & Wood, 1992, [1967]). In this essay, Fried argues that an abstract artwork must 'suspend its objecthood' by which he means that the work must be capable of the transmutation from a thing in itself to being a creation in the mind of the viewer. Although superficially, Fried adopts a similar position to Greenberg in his attempt to counter Donald Judd's impersonal concept of an artwork simply in its condition as a material object, 'Art and Objecthood' can also be seen as a text that advances Greenberg's concept of 'inspiration', by placing the inspiration with the viewer rather than the artist. In making reference to artworks by Anthony Caro, Fried argues that unbalancing any sense of visual certainty, which may have been assumed through the materials of an artwork alone, will allow the work to escape the condition its mere objecthood. For example, the abstract shapes that typified Caro's work from this period, explore a tension between the physicality of the materials used and the range of optical illusions revealed in their very specific composition. Caro's sculptural works are rigid, weighty constructions that are improbably balanced and in some cases,

even seem to hover above the ground. In creating them, Caro painted certain elements in bright colours, and set them at calculated angles to other elements in the structure. The end result implies varying perspectives of foreshortening and distancing amid irregular compositions that are juxtaposed with the rigidity and formality of the materials used. Again, as with *Horror Film 1*, all the component parts are on display for the viewer, which for Fried, means that 'Caro's sculptures defeat, or allay, objecthood by imitating, not gestures exactly, but the *efficiency*, of gesture' (Harrison & Wood, 1992, p 830).

The significance of Fried's text is that it emphasizes the viewer's reaction to an artwork as momentary and instantaneous. Similar to the 'magic' that Le Grice describes, it is a moment where everything is on display for the viewer, and yet despite this, there is the simultaneous possibility for the viewer to perceive an illusion. When this occurs, the artwork is beheld in a state of tension between these two experiences. Neither its construction, nor its illusion holds dominance over the other. Also with *Horror Film 1*, the viewer's positioning is the same, and it is at this point that the moment of 'inspiration' or 'magic' could be said to occur.

As far as this thesis is concerned, Fried's concept is relevant on several levels, mainly because it conceptualizes the artistic tension as something perceived by the viewer, and in doing so, alludes to an interesting phenomenon about the activity of 'perception' itself. If one were to consider Judd's concept in philosophical terms for example, then we might consider how his description of 'specific objects in actual space' is something that could also describe the viewer and their positioning as much as the artwork. In relation to Judd's work (rather than his concept), although he attempted to emphasize the impersonality of his art, it is quite apparent for the viewer that there is a sense of one's own personal presence nonetheless. Our height, our personal space, or even (as in *Horror Film 1*) the shadows and reflections that our bodies create as they interrupt, mediate and absorb the rays of light directed onto and bouncing back off the materials, are all symptoms that remind us of our own physicality in relation, not just to the works, but also to our environment as a whole. By grounding the art in the real physical world (where subtle shimmers or reflections generate their own

material aesthetic) the work acts as a reminder to the viewer, that even from a detached position, we must recognise that we are also 'specific objects' in the same 'specific space'. A tension occurs, when we realise that in establishing this sense of our own 'objecthood', we are also raising questions as to the objectivity of our own perception.

Although we might interpret our viewing as reactive, as though we are simply receiving information to which we react, it is in fact our active 'perception' of these material circumstances that generates our sensory experience. This is because, as viewers, we are individual *perceivers*, not mere receivers. And it is in this moment of recognition, that we are reminded of our own influence in mediating the artwork as a material experience of viewing. The 'magic' comes into being in our perception. (How far that magic can be a recreation is, of course, one of art's perennial problems, which this investigation cannot avoid, and to which this thesis returns to later)

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EXPANDED CINEMA AND NARRATIVE

Preface

The primary purpose of this text is to place the notion of the viewer's perception of tension in the context of current research in relevant areas of cinema-as-art. As discussed so far in this thesis, the viewer's attempt to perceive the image or the illusion can be set in tension with the viewer's simultaneous attempt to perceive the structure of the process of the work's creation – neither of which, if such tension is to be maintained, should succeed in holding dominance over the other. Where the previous section (Abstraction and Perception in Experimental Film) related this concept to certain historical debates regarding abstraction in 1960s modernist painting and sculpture, this text looks to recent debates, and in particular, to a research project titled Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema. I continue in my intention to show that as long as the concepts of dynamic tension and the viewer's role as perceiver of tension are kept central, a consistent theory of structural-materialist cinema can incorporate arguments that have seemed irreconcilable. From the point of view of a practicing artist, even more important than the consistency of a more integrated theory is its liberating potential.

Established by the late Jackie Hatfield in 2007, Hatfield's proposal for the research project was to explore the materialist approaches to cinema in line with the structural-materialist concept, but with additional emphasis placed on the multi-screen and the apparatus besides often physically locating the viewer and/or the performer within the work. This was then to be set in tension with more conventional cinematic languages such as 'dramaturgy, narrative [and] structure' (Hatfield, 2006, p.237). The basis for her proposal stemmed from a perception that the existence of narrative within concepts of expanded cinema is undervalued – especially in the dominant critical histories of experimental cinema (Hatfield, 2004, p.14). For Hatfield, these histories have helped to define a perspective of expanded cinema that denies the influence of narrative, or any potential for more freely emotional interpretation within the art. Unfortunately however, her untimely death meant that Hatfield's vision of how narrative could

enhance expanded cinema was never fully realized. In this third background text, I look to some of her earlier writings that preceded her last project and to some interpretations of her research by Malcolm Le Grice and Duncan White.

In looking to Malcolm Le Grice's paper, 'Time and the Spectator in the Experience of Expanded Cinema' delivered at the Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema Symposium 'The Live Record' in December 2008, I draw attention to Le Grice's admission that his own interpretation of Hatfield's concept of narrative, is overshadowed by a notion of the 'anti-narrative' – a concept, which he indicates had a considerable influence over his own practice as an artist (Le Grice, 2008). Even though this concept of the anti-narrative might be part of the critical orthodoxy that Hatfield was intent on arguing against, an endeavor for which I have considerable sympathy, Le Grice does raise some testing questions, that relate to the central theme of the present thesis. The most significant distinction that Le Grice makes is between 'narrative' and 'narration'. He argues that while narrative is understood as the 'story', narration can be interpreted as the process by which the story is told – or in other words, it is the actual *telling* of the story. The relevance of this point is the notion that narrative is essentially a linear concept and involves forms of consequentiality – i.e. it establishes a situation where the conclusion of the narrative becomes dominant. As Peter Gidal insists, such narrative forms and dominates a hierarchy (Gidal, 1976, no page number) and as I understand it, this must diminish the sense of tension that interests me in my own work. 'Narration' on the other hand, as a form of process, can be perceived as a structural component – something that potentially, *can* be set in tension with the imagery or the illusion that may otherwise be presented through an artwork.

With Duncan White's paper '*Degree Zero: Narration and Narrativity in Expanded Cinema*' presented in April 2009 at the conference Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema: Activating the Space of Reception, I discuss his argument relating to the viewer's 'consumption' of narrative (White, 2009). In response to Le Grice's articulation of the 'anti-narrative', White introduces a third concept in addition to the notions of 'narrative' and 'narration'. For White, the process of

'narrativity' is one that 'prioritizes an activity of reception' (2009). He defines this after Robert Scholes who, describes this as:

the process by which a perceiver actively constructs [meaning]
from the data provided by any narrative medium (Scholes in White,
2009).

With this text, White proposes that 'narrative is something that is constructed by the viewer, rather than something that is simply consumed' (2009). In other words, the identification and interpretation of narrative in a work becomes an active process, which the viewer undertakes as a part of experiencing the art. The implications of which, are that the power of interpretation is relocated to being with the viewer, rather than as orchestrated by the filmmaker. This also leads White to argue that the subject of the work is the viewer rather than the content. From this perspective, White is able to argue that an essence of expanded cinema is in the 'displacement of authorial control' to the viewer (White, 2009). By arguing this point, White addresses a concern of Jackie Hatfield's – the spectator's role within an expanded cinematic work. In paraphrasing Hatfield, (Hatfield, 2006, p.240), White then concludes with the statement that 'the viewer becomes an agent of change within the work' (White, 2009).

In relation to my own research, this concept is pertinent, as this sense of the viewer's 'authorial control' concludes the Background Chapter of this thesis, and supports the argument that it is the viewer's *attempt* to perceive the image/illusion/narrative alongside their *attempt* to perceive the materiality/structure/process of an artwork that creates and sustains the all-central tension.

EXPANDED CINEMA AND NARRATIVE

There is now a need for a major critical review of the practices of experimental film and video to examine the significance of technological experiment, experiment with narrative (dramaturgy), and performance (of the artist or the audience) within the [expanded] cinematic event, all hitherto under-explored in the written histories.

Jackie Hatfield (2004, p14)

The research project Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema, established by the late Jackie Hatfield in 2007, was a project that I found to be sympathetic to my own research interests. Hatfield's aspirations for the research, which she articulated in her preparatory articles and publications, reveal a sensibility towards conceptualizing and historicizing the role of both the medium and the material in the 'cinematic spectacle' – an issue of projection and of scale, as well as exhibition (Hatfield, 2006, p. 237) – in combination with the role of cinematic languages such as 'dramaturgy, narrative [and] structure' (p.237). Hatfield's proposal was to explore the materialist approaches to cinema, similar to the structural-materialist conception, but with an additional emphasis placed on the multi-screen and the apparatus as well as the often-used practice of physically locating the viewer and/or the performer within the work.

The questions that Hatfield envisioned involved exploring the materialist conception of cinema in relation to non-materialist expectations – namely those of narrative and implied meaning, which are usually associated with the content imagery. From a materialist perspective narrative, in particular, requires the passive audience that Peter Gidal has stated 'categorically rules out any dialectic [between audience and the work]' (Gidal, 1976) – this dialectic, being a fundamental aspect of the structural-materialist philosophy. Given that a coherent sense of narrative in cinema often depends on disguising and suppressing the structures and materials behind its production, it is interesting

to consider where Hatfield's proposal for a project on narrative and expanded cinema might lead. Her proposal is based upon the assertion that:

The ascendancy of any one theory, history or lineage of experimental film and video is due to the scarcity of writing relative to other art forms (Hatfield, 2004)

Her argument with the critical histories of expanded cinema is that the modernist tendencies – especially those of structural-materialist film and media-specific video – have (however inadvertently) helped to define a certain perspective on expanded cinema that essentially denies any influence of narrative, or any potential for an emotional interpretation, within the work of the structural-materialist era. Her theory is that a review of the expanded cinematic might reveal a tendency for 'narrative, image and spectacle' beyond that credited in modernist theoretical writing. It is in this light that Hatfield's project appealed to me as an area of research, being highly relevant to a study of the tension between material and image – akin to my own theoretical research interest and artistic practice.

Opinions vary as to how and when the term, 'Expanded Cinema' first came into use. Stan VanDerBeek is credited with coining the phrase in 1966 (White, 2008; Bartlett, 2009), although Gene Youngblood is also associated with the term after his 1970 publication by the same name. VanDerBeek's conception of expanded cinema is closely linked with his *Movie-Drome* (circa 1963) – a large aluminium dome, hemispherical in shape, which he used to create cinematic extravaganzas by projecting multiple, specially made films onto its interior surface. While his audience lay down on the ground, gazing upwards at a variety of curved and overlapping images, VanDerBeek's works of expanded cinema provided an alternative projection environment to the conventional single screen format one would typically associate with a traditional movie-house theatre. Youngblood's conception of expanded cinema takes on a more transcendent role. Although he also deals with cinema in this multiple-screen sense, Youngblood's thesis is one that perceives the expansion as lying within the progression of emerging technologies (which at that time were video and computer-generated imagery)

and the diminution in dominance of any singular moving image medium – namely film.

In general, Hatfield's writing leans towards the formal perspective of expanded cinema in a similar way that structural-materialist film and media specific video art draw a focus towards the apparatus of cinematic production. Her notion of expanded cinema can also be seen to adopt some ideas from both VanDerBeek and Youngblood. For example, her inclusion of pre and proto-cinema (such as zoetropes or magic lanterns) within her definitions (2006), echo VanDerBeek's *Movie-Drome* in the way they represent a similar physicality to the cinematic experience. Albeit on a different scale, the viewer is consciously aware of their physical presence when viewing the work. Similarly, her inclusion of 'sites of exhibition outside the permanent location of the cinema theatre' (2006, p.237) also conveys a sympathy for Vanderbeek's model. From Youngblood, she borrows the notion that expanded cinema need not be 'a movie at all', stating that 'the term [cinema] does not fully express the conceptual ambition and technological diversity of artists cinematic experiment' (2006, p.237). Interestingly, in the light of Youngblood's premonition that the dominance of film as the singular cinematic medium would wane, Hatfield's concept of expanded cinema celebrates a diversity of media, including electronic and digital media, as well as allowing for explorations with 'interactivity; synaesthesia, semi-immersion; multiple screen configurations; and exhibition' (p.238). This is compounded by the inclusion of cinematic works that might individually consist of a collage of multiple technologies and multiple media as well:

Importantly, the term cinema is not yoked to the material conditions of [one] medium. The cinematic experience can cross media boundaries or be achieved through a range of media combinations; 'old' media are *enhanced* by the 'new', not superseded. A cinematic configuration could involve intermedia, performance, spectacle, video, art and technology, and film, and could be located within the 'black space' of the cinema or 'white cube' of the gallery (2006, p.238).

The sensory response in the spectator was also of great significance within Hatfield's theory. For her, expanded cinema is not only 'an expansion of the material in a physical sense' but it is also one, which 'creates a sensorial experience or situation for audience participation' (2006, p.237). She illustrates this with reference to Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) – an artwork, often categorized as expanded cinema because it makes the projected light the focal point rather than the receiving screen. For this work, an audience will typically enter a darkened exhibition space, filled with a fine mist. A film projector sends a beam of light stretching out from the front of the projector lens to a distant screen or wall on the other side of the exhibition space. The effect is created when the light emerges from a small pinprick made in an otherwise opaque filmstrip and illuminates the mist as it travels the length of the exhibition space. Gradually, this singular beam of light begins to develop into a three-dimensional curve, which over the course of 30 minutes becomes a complete hollow cone, extending from its apex at the projector's lens, to its base on the receiving screen or wall. The pinprick on the filmstrip, which originally formed a small spot of concentrated light on that receiving screen, is now a perfect circle at the base of the coned light – the line, which 'describes' the cone. But it is the striking physicality of the projected light's presence, which captures the audience's attention in this work. Waving fingers, hands, arms and entire bodies interrupt the beam of light, momentarily breaking and continuing its trajectory, as audience members cast long shadows through the cone's ethereal glow. McCall himself describes the work as a film that:

...only exists in the present: the movement of the projection. It refers to nothing beyond this real time. It contains no illusion. It is a primary experience, not secondary: i.e., the space is real not referential; the time is real, not referential. No longer is one viewing position as good as any other. For this film, every viewing position presents a different aspect. The viewer therefore has a participatory role in apprehending the event: he or she can, indeed needs, to move around relative to the slowly emerging light form (Hatfield, 2006, p.62)

The human presence of the spectator (or the artist as in Malcolm Le Grice's *Horror Film*) within Hatfield's conceptualization is also of great significance, as she refers to their role at times as 'protagonist' within the work 'intervening directly with the cinematic apparatus' (2004). For Hatfield *Line Describing a Cone* can be associated with Roland Barthes description of film-projection in a cinema theatre: 'visible and yet unnoticed, the dancing cone which drills through the darkness of the theatre like a laser beam' (Barthes in Hatfield, 2004, p15). Except, as Hatfield describes, McCall's light cone is 'almost physically tangible, the projected light transformed into solid shape through the black filmstrip' and while the audience in Barthes' description are 'anonymous', the audience for *Line Describing a Cone* are 'mesmerized', which for Hatfield, makes them 'an integral aspect of the cinema mechanism' (2004, p16) thus fulfilling the dialectic between material and viewer that Peter Gidal's conceptualization of structural-materialist film demands.

Unfortunately, as we know, Hatfield's conception of how narrative worked within this expansion was never fully documented. Her emphasis on the active presence of the spectator provided some clues when she referred to works where the audiences have to navigate between the physicality of different screens in order to experience different aspects of the same artwork. For example, she refers to Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story* (1974), where two different perspectives from the same incident are projected onto the two opposite sides of a suspended screen. This way, the audience must maneuver around the screen in order to *see* both sides of the story. But as Malcolm Le Grice indicates, her conception of narrative remained ambiguous mainly because her notion of narrative within expanded cinema seemed to include some form of emotional phenomenon that connects the audience, consciously or unconsciously, with the content imagery of the work (Le Grice, 2008). Perhaps for this reason, it was something that couldn't be concretely explained. Hatfield does however cite a range of examples of artists' work and un-credited expanded cinema histories that she claims could potentially – if effectively expounded – provide a new insight into experiments with expanded cinema and narrative. These include the experiments that 'took place within the movements of

Futurism, Dada, Bauhaus and at the Black Mountain College' (whose alumni also included Stan VanDerBeek) as well as experiments with performance and the women's movement – a notable example being 'the performance-orientated cinematic spectacles' of Carolee Schneeman, and some less celebrated feminist groups of the 1970s and 1980s, many of which, Hatfield claims were: 'narrative driven, certainly political and often oppositional' (Hatfield, 2003, n. pag). With regard to these experiments in particular being 'omitted from the canonical histories' of experimental film, Hatfield expresses her concern that too much of the dominant theory based itself on the 'demarcation between dramatic narrative and experimental film - i.e. drama was narrative, experimental film was anti-narrative' Thus, 'the problem is [that] it was along similar lines of definition that the majority of women's practice of the 1970s and 1980s was marginalized as being narrative and therefore not art (i.e. not coming from the abstract or formal film' (2003, n. pag). It could be assumed then that these questions along with research gathered from what Hatfield perceives as the many un-credited histories of artists' cinema were to form the basis to her proposed project 'Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema'. For Hatfield:

It is largely the definition of narrative that I take issue with and the uncertainties about the real intricacies of 'narrativity'. The general tone within avant-garde debates has been that artists were against narrative continuity and conventional cause and effect structures, and the focus has been on work that that can be interpreted as anti-narrative or 'liberated' from 'the demands of narrative continuity' (Hatfield, 2003, no page number)

'After all' she asks 'what is narrative' given that:

It can be argued that narrative exists as soon as there is a representational image or as soon as there is a subject present. So for example, when we see a performance as part of a screening, or when we experience expanded cinema, the bodies of the performer or audience are physically present as living embodiments of their narrative histories, we come from a narrative place. My point is

that the opposition to narrative has never been resolved; the lines of demarcation never quite clear (2003, no page number).

In an attempt to interpret Hatfield's research interests, Malcolm Le Grice discussed some of the issues raised by the concept of narrative within expanded cinema at the first Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema symposium 'The Live Record' (2008). By his own admission however, Le Grice implies that his interpretation is perhaps prejudiced by the influence of 'anti-narrative' – a concept that he maintains was an 'ideological point' for many experimental filmmakers at that time (Le Grice, 2008). Unfortunately, this is also one of the very concepts that Hatfield believed to represent the 'conservative position' in the modernist history of experimental film and video, and which, given the statements above, she clearly believed required some reviewing (Hatfield, 2003). Nevertheless, Le Grice's interpretation does provide important ideas on the problems the concept of narrative introduces for Hatfield's proposal.

Le Grice's talk at the 'Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema' symposium was titled *Time and The Spectator in the Experience of Expanded Cinema* and addressed how the spectator's construction of time in cinema is affected by narration, and subsequently, how this can be subverted through expanded cinema. His argument is that by deliberately confusing the sense of 'narration' in the work, one can disrupt the spectators' sense of temporal coherence – this 'sense of disruption', being a fundamental feature of expanded cinema. Le Grice stresses the differences between 'narrative' and 'narration', arguing that while narrative is understood as the 'story', narration can be interpreted as the *process* by which this story is told; or quite simply, it is the telling of the story. For Le Grice, this is a very important distinction. Narration is the constructing of a story, while 'Narrative', he argues 'is the story':

It is stringing together a number of events in a way that has apparent consequentiality – meaning one thing is causal on another. There is a point at the end when this comes together into a dénouement, which is the result of all these events. Even though

there may be sidetracks to this, it is fundamentally linear (Le Grice, 2008, no page number).

Understanding narrative as linear, or as something that involves consequentiality, is an essential point in the exploration of narrative within expanded cinema, mainly because it implies a sense of dominance, which as Peter Gidal stresses, is a more of a problem than a problematic (Gidal, 1976). In an interview with David Curtis and Duncan White, Le Grice points out that with narrative 'the narrator is privileged in knowing the end. So you encounter the narrative [as] a preordained event (Le Grice, 2008b, p.1). Narration on the other hand, does not necessarily have to be linear, nor does it depend on any form of consequentiality. This is because there are no set rules as to how narration should be interpreted. 'Narration', Le Grice explains, 'can occur in a different order to the thing that is being represented. In other words, you can start from one end and then go back to the beginning' (Le Grice, 2008). In many ways, this represents the anti-narrative philosophy Le Grice's position stems from, and which influences his understanding of experimental and avant-garde cinema. In providing some examples, Le Grice refers to Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929), indicating that:

[Buñuel and Dalí] put together sequences of images that could have been put together in narrative films, but they put them together in such a way that the relationship between one and the next created a concept of occurrences and causality (or attempted non-causality, but actually a kind of causality) that did not fit the normal pattern of representing a coherent set of events that appeared to exist in the real world (Le Grice, 2008).

In relating this idea to expanded cinema, Le Grice contemplates the use of the single-screen as a singular fixed viewpoint through which the narration is generally told. For him, the narration that takes place off-screen can be just as important as what is represented on-screen, so he declares his interest in alternating this fixed viewpoint. Through the use of multiple screens, or by showing different camera angles of the same event, Le Grice creates multiple

viewpoints in the work that disrupt the viewer's attempts to perceive a spatial coherence. To explain, Le Grice uses the concept of perspective as an analogy:

I like to draw a comparison between what we know of perspective in visual representation. Perspective depends upon putting a person in a single fixed viewpoint and constructing an illusion of a space that is behind a picture plane, which is coherent but utterly dependent on the rules of that fixed viewpoint and non-movement. I like to think that narrative in its pure sense is equivalent to that. It is taking the viewer through not just a single point, but through a single line of access to a story (2008).

By combining multiple viewpoints with his concept of 'narration', which already includes the original disruption of a temporal coherence caused by images being shown out of sequence, Le Grice asserts his meaning of the anti-narrative in expanded cinema. It is in emphasizing this process of 'narration' that Le Grice rejects narrative and, in doing so, promotes tension in the artwork. It is a process that alternates between the impending sense of narrative and its immediate and unequivocal denial.

These ideas of disruption of the spatial and temporal coherence can be seen in his artwork *After Manet – Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* (1975) and *After Lumière – Arroseur Arrosé* (1974). A four-screen film-installation *After Manet* restages Édouard Manet's famous 19th Century painting *Le Déjeuner sur L'Herbe* (1863). As in Manet's painting, Le Grice's film installation depicts four people sitting and having a picnic under a tree, except in Le Grice's version, the situation is viewed from four different camera angles. In creating the work, each person at the picnic was given a different camera to film with. Thus, in the final installation, the viewer is privy to what was being filmed at the same time as they view the filming taking place. As Duncan White states, 'the film's makers are also the film's protagonists':

The continuous changing of positions, denies a singular or fixed point of view in the film. The activity of viewing and being viewed is interchangeable (White, 2009, no page number).

In *After Lumière* Le Grice reenacts the famous scenario depicted by the Lumière Brothers in *The Sprinkler Sprinkled* (1895) where a young boy stands on a gardener's hose pipe, interrupting the flow of water until the gardener looks inquisitively down the end of the hose. At which point, the boy releases his foot and with it the flow of water, spraying the gardener in the face. Le Grice plays this scenario out four times on four different reels of film, with each reel of film a different film stock – the first is in black and white, the second is negative black and white, the third is negative colour, and the last is in positive colour. Although the content of each reel shows the same scenario, each reel is actually the scenario reenacted four different times – but each time, revealing a slightly different aspect to the film and its construction.

The first reel, in black and white, is silent. It shows the gardener in the garden watering the plants. The child enters the frame (in Le Grice's version it is in fact a young girl), stands on the hose and interrupts the flow of the water. The gardener looks down the hose, gets the water in his face and chases the laughing girl out of frame. The reel of film finishes with flashes of 'ghosting' or 'spilt light' that trace across the frame before there is a cut to black. The second reel then starts, except this time the footage is accompanied by a musical piano score (Erik Satie's *Gnossiennes No. 1 - Lent*). The scenario begins to play out again, as the gardener enters frame with the hosepipe. However, this time, before the girl enters, the musical accompaniment stops. The gardener continues to water the plants and a third character, not in the Lumière Brothers' original film, enters frame. It is a woman. She walks towards the gardener, they exchange some words and then she turns and walks out of shot. The girl then enters, stands on the hose and the musical accompaniment starts again. As usual the gardener gets sprayed in the face and he and the girl run off screen. The film reel then ghosts again and cuts to black, but the music continues to be heard. When the third reel of film starts – this time in negative colour – the music is again present, but now there is also an ambient soundtrack – the kind of environmental noises that are picked up when filming – birds tweeting and the sound of a soft wind, for example. The third time we see the scenario played out, the gardener enters, followed by the woman. She walks out of shot, and the girl enters. Again the

music stops as the woman enters, but starts again as the young girl appears. The water sprays out of the hose and the characters leave the frame. When the final reel of film starts in positive colour, the music is heard during a white lead-in. But as the image comes in to view, it is not the usual shot of the garden. Instead it is a shot of the woman seated at a piano, playing the musical score. Through a glass door next to where she is seated, glimpses of the garden are just perceptible as the camera follows the woman's movements. Soon she comes to the end of a bar in the music, and rises from the piano. She stands up and walks outside through the glass door, where the gardener comes into view. The camera follows her as far as the door and lingers. We see her speak to the gardener for a moment before turning and walking back through the door and inside. This time the camera doesn't follow her, but continues to look out through the glass door at the gardener. In the background, we can see the young girl standing on the hosepipe. Cue the music, the spray of water, and the gardener chasing the young girl. The camera then remains on the running hosepipe for a moment before returning to focus on the woman playing the piano until the reel of film finishes, signaling the end of the work.

It is interesting to contemplate how Le Grice's emphasis on the anti-narrative in this work would have stood with regard to Jackie Hatfield's vision for a narrative interpretation within expanded cinema. Although we are seeing 'narration' (in that Le Grice is foregrounding the elements that construct the story), it is also possible to say that we are viewing a form of 'narrative' taking place in the revealing of the film's construction. The ambiguity one might allude to with *After Lumière* is that the narrative that emerges is a narrative of disruption and denial of the processes by which the content imagery acts as the primary signifier of a story being told. Instead of reading the narrative through the imagery, we are reading the narrative through the material of the medium – a process, which involves, or perhaps even requires, the active displacement of the content imagery from the centre of our attention.

We might at first view the film as being a story about the gardener and the girl, but through the variety of indexical techniques employed by Le Grice, we are consistently reminded that it is the material condition of the artwork, which

forms the narrative. This is probably most apparent through the repetition of the scenario on the different film stock but it also occurs through the use of the music. Similar to the way we might have originally viewed the content imagery as the focal point for the narrative development, the occurrence of the music in the second reel of film has, at first, the presence of a musical accompaniment or post-dubbed score in the same way that musical scores are attached in post-production to a traditional narrative-based movie – to heighten the mood or imply certain narrative implications etc. Instead, Le Grice reveals the music as simply another material element. Despite its appearance within the content imagery, it serves no narrative purpose other than emphasizing the construction of the film. Because of this, we are encouraged to view the work itself as the film's protagonist.

After Lumière is particularly interesting in this regard because, as Duncan White remarks, when the child stands on the hosepipe, just beyond the gardener's line of sight, 'the visual joke depends upon the viewer being able to see more than the protagonist can' (White, 2009). This is true of the narrative content in both the Lumière Brothers' early film and Le Grice's reenactment. But an underlying point that Le Grice's work also makes is that the viewer is (initially at least) unaware of the 'real' narrative in the film as well. It plays with the natural tendency of the viewer – which Peter Gidal refers to as the 'ideal tendency' in conventional narrative cinema (1976) – to ignore the film's construction, and focus on the content imagery instead. By deliberately pulling the viewer away from the imagery and pointing towards the raw material of the film, *After Lumière* provides an example of what White describes as 'questioning the usual practice of consuming narrative' (White, 2009).

For Duncan White, *After Lumière* provides a further opportunity to explore this ambiguity in conceptualizing a narrative through the anti-narrative process of expanded cinema. In his talk *Degree Zero: Narration and Narrativity in Expanded Cinema* (2009), presented at the second Narrative Explorations in Expanded Cinema Conference (Tate Modern, April 2009), White introduces a third concept beyond Le Grice's interpretations of narrative and narration: which is the process of 'narrativity'. He defines this after Robert Scholes who, referring to

narration as 'a process of enactment or recounting' i.e. a form of story telling, defines 'narrativity' as:

Refer[ing] to the process by which a perceiver actively constructs [meaning] from the data provided by any narrative medium (Scholes in White, 2009, n. pag).

White uses this definition to address the 'role of spectatorship' when it comes to interpreting narrative in expanded cinema. In following Scholes' definition of narrativity, White theorizes that while narration 'prioritizes an activity of production, [narrativity] prioritizes an activity of reception' (White, 2009). He proposes then that 'narrative is something that is constructed by the viewer, rather than something that is simply consumed' (2009). In other words, the identification and interpretation of narrative in a work becomes an active process, which the viewer undertakes as a part of experiencing the work. The implication of this is that the power of interpretation is relocated with the viewer rather than orchestrated by the filmmaker. He argues that such anti-narrative processes, as are evident in *After Lumière*, draw our attention to this.

This type of work denies narration but encourages narrativity. As with the Lumière Brother's original film, the subject of the work is the viewer (White, 2009).

The basis of White's conceptualization stems from an idea that is essentially post-structural. His argument is that: 'as a film's meaning is broken down, and resituated with the viewer, the condition of narrative in [expanded cinema] is displaced as a form of control' (White, 2009). One of the main points he addresses with regard to this is the use of time in *After Lumière*. In sympathy with Le Grice's theorizing on the spectator's sense of time, as affected by narration, White references his approach in *After Lumière* as one that is 'material' in its manipulation of time.

White pinpoints a 'pronounced slip in the relationship between time and narrative, or between the time of viewing and the time of the film' (2009). He contrasts the difference between the synchronicity of 'real time' and 'represented time' in conventional movie cinema, in which the viewer's

narrativity creates the coherence, with how Le Grice's 'repetition of the act from alternative viewpoints [means that] time and narrative are thrown out of synch', stating that:

Rather than continuous or coherent, the time of the film is repeated and to some extent made uncanny. Indeed, like the four different film stocks used, the relationship between time and narrative becomes a material within the film (White, 2009)

However, White argues that this is also a material of which the 'viewer's experience' intervenes in the film. He indicates that the disruption of synchronicity between real time and represented time is key to this concept of narrativity in *After Lumière*, because, instead of 'being used to synchronize time and space', it 'breaks it up' (2009). For White, 'the inconsistencies of repetition in *After Lumière*' mean that the viewer's experience of real time, i.e. the time of viewing, becomes an active process in the work:

In a way, *After Lumière*'s structure of intervention lets the viewer into the film. The viewer takes an active part in how the film is seen and then re-seen through the various repetitions as the viewer compares what they have seen with what they have already seen (2009).

For White, this 'seeing and re-seeing' of the elements of narration constitutes a challenge to the (normal) process of narrativity. His argument implies that in conventional 'movie' cinema, the viewer is privileged to construct a narrative (through this process of narrativity) without any interruption. Of course with expanded cinema (at least in its structural-materialist guise), the challenge is to purposefully disrupt the viewer's anticipated construction – typically through the materialist anti-narrative approach as articulated by Le Grice. But by conceptualizing this narrativity as an active process on behalf of the viewer, White is able to argue that an essence of expanded cinema is in this 'displacement of authorial control' to the viewer (2009). In doing so, he addresses Jackie Hatfield's concern for the spectator's role within an expanded cinematic work that is narrative based. In paraphrasing Hatfield, White

concludes with the statement: 'the viewer becomes an agent of change within the work' (2009).

I relate this sense of the viewer's 'authorial control' relates closely to my concern with the viewer's process of identification with the material/medium of an artwork in tension with their identification with the content imagery.

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CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT FOR THE PRACTICE

PERCEIVING THE MATERIAL IN DIGITAL MEDIA

The arrival of the video-portapak in 1968 was [an] essential moment of cultural history. The early days of a new medium are always immensely fertile, since no one knows what they are supposed to do with it, [and] pioneers feel free to try everything.

Sean Cubitt (2005, no page number)

To adapt Sean Cubitt's analysis of the cultural impact made by the arrival of the video portapak, the emergence of digital media with their computer-based production facilities have had as significant an influence on the development of moving image art as did the first commercially available cinematographs and video-technologies. The earliest video-mixing decks allowed for crude time-based correction and image-keying: more recent software packages made it possible to manipulate individual pixels within the most detailed of images, and gave the facility to generate and add 'photo-real' 3D objects that can be animated within an image as though they were actually recorded. Clearly the impact of digital media on the production of moving images has been profound. Also, the important development of non-linear editing has had a profound effect on the way digital cinema is conceptualized by enabling a user to move at any moment between any frame at any point within the footage without having to cut and splice separate material frames of film or re-record in real time a separate 'master' videotape. This ability to pool and access information at will, has led media theorists such as Lev Manovich to proclaim the possibilities of a 'database narrative' (Manovich, 2001) while Malcolm Le Grice contemplates the 'radical implications for art, structures of aesthetic expression and representation' provided by the process of 'arbitrary access' (Le Grice, 2001). However, certain theories regarding the impact of digital media are not always so optimistic. For example, Chris Meigh-Andrews states:

Although this kind of non-linear manipulation provides the artist with the potential for far greater control of the ordering and construction of his or her work, it does not [necessarily] provide

the viewer with similar enhanced possibilities (Meigh-Andrews, 2006, p.268).

Despite the rapid growth of digital technology since the 1990s, (which included the availability of affordable technology for the individual user, coupled with the wide-spread appeal of online distribution systems e.g. YouTube) its near-omnipresence could be said to have had a detrimental impact on the art viewer's appreciation for digital effects. Arguably, this very condensed period of activity and innovation in computer technology, has very quickly allowed the viewer to become over-exposed to the visual aesthetic of digital imagery. As Nicky Hamlyn observes, referring to an abundance of digital effects in movies and television advertisements, that it is perhaps unsurprising that digital imaging could actually be 'characterized' by its 'extensive treatment' (Hamlyn, 2003, p.17). Although a range of artists have already (and of course, will continue to do so) probed the possibilities of digital technology in a way that should have a lasting impact, the more polemical criticism of digital imagery as art is that it often produces 'predictable results' (Hamlyn, 2003, p. 18). 'The shock of the new', as Robert Hughes might have it (1991), has become rather rapidly the inevitability of the unremarkable. One reason for this is because many digital artworks are created using commercially available software. The criticism is that any ability to manipulate an image is seemingly the end-result of the true creativity of the software engineers. Sean Cubitt for example, states that 'few if any significant works of digital media art have been made using off the shelf software' (Cubitt in Le Grice, 2001, p.x). His argument being that unless an artwork can be understood to communicate the significance of a particular effect or series of effects, then celebrating its aesthetic is likely to be an empty experience. As Hamlyn states in agreement:

The endless streams of abstract colour imagery concocted by 'VJs' in clubs [for example] represent the lazy end of digital video work. In them software can clearly be seen acting in a formulaic manner on a given shape, twisting and rotating it into fractal-like patterns, creating a maelstrom of swirling, multi-coloured porridge. The lack of friction in the work, the lack of hesitancy or surprise, the quick

realization that a predictable interplay of sequencing is being mechanically played out, is what makes the work rapidly become boring, the brilliant colour oppressive (Hamlyn, 2003, p.18).

It would be naïve, however, to suggest that this criticism is deserved of all digital effects. The spectacular super-impositions of monsters and robots in Hollywood movies for example, which are usually achieved by teams of specially trained 'visual effects artists'⁸ (often working all at the same time on several different aspects of a single digital frame) do not only require an extreme act of dedication on a laborious animation process, but also a high level of skill and an astute knowledge of complicated software programs. Nevertheless, as technology progresses and the specialist software becomes more widely used, it is possible that a spectral criticism will still linger with a prophecy that the industry standard effects, which may seem spectacular today, will inevitably become generic in the future. Celebrating a fetish for an abstract digital effect of insignificant worth is perhaps not enough to fully engage the art-viewer. As Michael Rush states:

As in any technology driven medium, the most dynamic work occurs when the technology catches up with the artist, or conversely, artists catch up with the technology. In painting or sculpture, it is the concepts and uses of materials that change in art. With technology-based art, the medium itself radically changes when the technology changes. The excitement that [Eadweard] Muybridge felt in being able to capture movement with his 'chronophotography' is now replaced by an enthusiasm for altering reality, for making the real illusory. For some critics computer-based art lacks the depth of intent they associate with, for example, abstract painting. They find it boring, or like holography, too superficial in its trickery (Rush, 2005, p.193)

It is difficult to be certain why visual effects conjured through digital media should receive such damning criticism as being 'predictable' and 'boring', while a

⁸ As typically referred to in the movie industry

pioneering filmwork such as Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* remains 'anything but a banal experience' (Manovich, 2001, p. 241) or why Malcolm Le Grice's *Horror Film 1* should be considered capable of eliciting something 'magical'. Indeed, one could even ask, what is it about an abstract painting or sculpture that seemingly can't be expressed in the same way through digital media? As discussed in the previous sections of the 'background' chapter, the argument is that there must be a connection between the image and the medium in order for an artwork to 'succeed'. As this argument goes, such a connection is formed through a perception of the medium's materiality, and even when an artwork is abstract, and 'form' is the central conceptual concern, it is essentially through the materiality of the medium that the viewer is able to connect with the work because materiality is an intrinsic portrayal of the capacity for change in an artwork's physical state. It would seem then, that another reason why digital effects are so heavily criticized is because there appears to be a fundamental problem in finding the same sense of 'vulnerability' in the structure of a digital image. This is connected with the apparent problem of finding a direct physical encounter with the materiality of digital media – something, which we might otherwise associate with the tactility of film, and in other ways, also with analogue video⁹. It is an experience that Malcolm Le Grice has described as 'a condition of 'presence' – an encounter with the physical, specific to the art object, its medium, its location in space and historical time.' (Le Grice, 2001, p.310). It is an argument that relates to Greenberg's notion that an artwork's aesthetic is specific to the physical properties of its medium (e.g. how paint is affected by the 'specificity' of the canvas' texture and shape, and how a 'phenomenon' occurs in the reality of the visible and material world.) This is something we can literally see in abstract painting or sculpture through a juxtaposition of colours or materials, and the conditions of the physical environment (which even includes

⁹ The video artist Mick Hartney states: 'there was a time when there was a vestige left of materiality in video in the sense that you handled the videotape. You threaded it. You put the reels onto the recorder yourself. You could touch the videotape. There were several works made where the actual handling of the videotape was important part of the piece, for instance in the use of static electricity. A spark of electricity between the artist or the subject and the tape produced a visible effect in the recording' (Hartney, 2008). Another example of this material interaction with video in art is in Nam June Paik's *Magnet TV* (1965), where Paik attaches a magnet to the outside of a television set and 'palpably' manipulates and distorts the generated image.

the activity of the artist) that inevitably result in the subtle shifts in tone and texture of the artwork. It is this 'materiality' that Le Grice argues '[stresses] the physical continuity between medium and meaning' (p.311).

It is an argument that essentially brings us back to J. Dudley Andrew's analogy originally discussed in the first section of this thesis. His description of '[turning] the window at an angle until the glass begins to reflect the light' (1976, p.31) is an example of Le Grice's 'condition of presence'. It is in the act of physically turning the window that we are presented with the material object that permits the view beyond to be seen. Becoming 'aware of the frame, of the glass, of its texture, of all the kinds of light it allows to pass, and so on' (p.31) invites the viewer to appreciate the aesthetic mediation and distortion that the glass is capable of having upon the view. And it is in this sense that a distortion in film becomes tangible as 'a component of the physical world' (Le Grice, 2001, p.310). If we were to observe these distortions of their own accord, without an overt reference to the physical presence of the glass window, our sense of appreciation for the effect would not necessarily be the same – perhaps because they would seem, as Michael Rush suggests, 'too superficial in [their] trickery' (2005, p.193). So it is in this perception of materiality that we can assume the viewer's connection with an artwork to exist. 'As long as a medium [has] a relatively limited set of physical characteristics' Le Grice argues, '[then an artwork can] demonstrate continuity between the special characteristics of a medium, its aesthetic components and its [conceptual] 'language' (Le Grice, 2001, p.310).

The crucial difference with digital cinema is in this apparent non-tangibility of the media's 'material'. While we might consider the essence of film in terms of the chemical and mechanical processes which center around the developing of a filmstrip, by comparison the processes of digital media are not so obviously physical. Given that the equivalent of Dudley Andrew's glass window in digital media are the 1s and 0s of a binary code, these processes are not so visibly discernable either. Translated to and from a signal, 'the most fundamental characteristic of the form of data used in the computer' as Le Grice describes it, 'is its ultimate abstraction as discrete electrical pulses' (p.313). Because of this, it is hard to imagine how this 'essence' of digital media might be tangibly

manipulated (beyond that of mathematical re-coding) to reveal any sense of materiality equivalent to the glass window's refractions of light. Even when an image is revealed in its most abstract form as a coded sequence of 1s and 0s, any sense of artistry (aesthetic of otherwise) that one might attempt to derive purely from the sequence itself is severely limited – especially for the (unacquainted) viewer – because, as Le Grice again suggests, 'without an agreed system for interpreting the coded data, the data for one type of information looks exactly like the data for any other type of information' (p.313). So it is from this perspective that one can argue, as Le Grice does, that 'digital media seem to defy finding a physical basis for the aesthetic' (p.311). This is an important issue and it can be seen as a fundamental problem in the creation of moving image art through digital media. According to Le Grice, 'The greatest difficulty posed by digital media... is to the idea of basing an artistic language on the 'material' conditions of a medium' (p.282).

As already implied in this thesis, Malcolm Le Grice has made an important contribution to the debates that surround Structural-Materialist Cinema both through his artistic practice and through his critical and theoretical writings. Crucially, his contribution has continued into the ongoing debates that explore similar concepts in digital cinema. In his essay *Digital Cinema and Experimental Film – Continuities and Discontinuities* (2001) for example, Le Grice seeks to determine an approach to the practice of structural/materialism through digital media despite their lack of a tangible materiality. This is also despite a notion that a computer is fundamentally 'eclectic' in its purpose, meaning that it is difficult to isolate any singular aesthetic in its output. As Le Grice states, 'It seems able to incorporate or interface with almost all previous media – the written word, pictures, music and even the time flow of images and sound, which make up cinema and video [as well as] communication forms like the telephone, or TV' (p.310). This is an issue that is further compounded when taking a more 'apparatus-minded' approach to working with the physical aesthetic of the actual technology, because digital technology is immensely variable and subject to significant changes in the course of its development. Computer screens for example, have developed very rapidly from box-shaped monitors to flat-screen

liquid crystal displays with touch-screen technology. In this sense, exploring the physical aesthetic of a computer monitor would be a short-lived affair. Even considering the computer chip as a possible form of materiality is a tenuous concept because, as Le Grice declares, '[they] are either insignificant, like the boxes in which the components are contained, or electronically of such small scale that they are outside of our perception' (2001, p.312).

The main point that Le Grice anchors his argument upon, is that it is through 'process', rather than digital media's hardware or intrinsic aesthetic, that one can perceive a sense of their 'materiality' (p.312). This relates back to an original concern of structural-materialist filmmaking articulated by Peter Gidal in his description of a film 'as a record (not a representation, not a reproduction) of its own making' (Gidal, 1976). Essentially, Gidal is describing a conceptual idea where 'art' is perceived in the 'event', as well as, and sometimes even instead of, the resolution or culmination of the work. It is a concept that Le Grice had previously described as the 'material situation of access' (2001, p.167), meaning that it is in this 'coming into presence' (Gidal, 1976) of the film that the viewer can gain access to the state(s) of change in the media. The areas that Le Grice highlights in *Digital Cinema and Experimental Film...* as potential structural-materialist processes are in 'digitization', 'analysis', 'synthesis', 'translation or transformation', 'program or programmability', 'arbitrary access' and 'interactivity' (pp. 313-316). Under each of these categories, Le Grice issues strict criteria adhering to his materialist (and modernist) perspective, this way he is able to argue that these processes are 'intrinsic characteristics or basic concepts of digital media' (p.312).

In addressing his first process, 'digitization', which could be understood as any form of recording taken through digital media, Le Grice indicates that unlike film, the information that is stored as digital code does not visually resemble the source from which it derives. Although ones and zeros might be considered a form of abstraction ('it is difficult to imagine a greater degree of abstraction' (p.313)) he considers that 'without an agreed system for interpreting the coded data, the data for one type of information looks exactly like the data for any other type of information' (p.313). He does however suggest that from a purely visual

perspective, the pixel might be considered as a substitute for this code because it is symbolic of the process (this is because each pixel is seen to embody one component dot of an image while it is also representative of a received digital code). This leads him to the process of 'analysis', where he argues that, in order for digital media to fully represent its source, any analysis taking place within the media (either through software or hardware) must remain consistent throughout. In abstractionist terms then, undermining this consistency might act as a modernist process in the same way that adjusting a singular component in the process of developing film would be.

With regard to 'synthesis' the process is more complicated. As a concept, it can be linked with the output process because it involves the translation and potential reinterpretation of information, but as Le Grice argues, 'synthesis' is more complicated than 'analysis' because 'it is possible for the synthetic process to generate both the data and its form of presentation' (p. 313). In this sense the synthetic process, is typically aligned with special effects and the way something representational can be created solely from within the computational process without any externally recorded information:

This synthesis without stored data may be aimed at a recognizable representation derived from a fundamental analysis of the component features of the world being modeled, or it might be more limited and based on the generation of an imaginary or aesthetic environment with no intended resemblance to the 'real' world (2001, pp. 313, 314).

As Le Grice also indicates, it may not even represent the 'real' world in a way that other systems of representation i.e. film or video, might. From this perspective, 'synthesis' is perhaps the most easily criticized form of abstraction in digital art, because it will most likely involve the use of pre-programmed software and diminish the role of the artist in the creation of an effect. It is an argument that is in agreement with Nicky Hamlyn's criticism that unless an artist can claim a sense of authorship over the effect, the tendency is to produce predictable results (Hamlyn, 2003, p. 18). 'It is a serious question for digital art' Le Grice

states 'when the artist does not take responsibility for the form of analysis underlying the aesthetic processes within the output work' (2001, p. 314).

Le Grice's fourth process of 'transformation or translation' relates literally to the transformation of information from one format to another. This could refer to the reinterpretation of data recorded as moving image and then output as sound. As Le Grice explains, 'the computer has no opinion on the way in which data is used – it is happy for the ones and zeros of a photograph to be sent to the loudspeaker as to the screen' (p.314). But 'transformation or translation' could also refer to more subtle processes in colour deviation by reinterpreting an image through different software or hardware. An example might even be in the transformation of an image from an RGB coded format (red, green and blue) - which most computer monitors use to generate tone – to a CMYK format (cyan, magenta, yellow and black) – which is a format used by some colour printers, and typically refers to the coloured inks. The difference may be slight, but at least the end-result could be understood as a form of mediation. Interpreting Le Grice's text, it seems as though 'translation or transformation' has a potential for abstraction that Le Grice accepts as suitably materialist. This is because unlike the processes of 'synthesis' and 'analysis' digital media 'is used to process rather than simply reproduce data' (p. 314). He states that 'this concept of transformation or translation is not simply an available option' (p.314) meaning that unlike using a software program for its designed purpose (and generally producing a predictable outcome), an artist, partially at least, can be in strategic control of the material process when sending data to a particular output device.

The fifth process, that of 'program or programmability' is a more purist argument in digital art theory, and refers to the programming of code. Even though the code is fundamental to digital media, the idea of programming is still consistent with Le Grice's general argument that 'process', rather hardware, is key to perceiving materiality in digital media. This is because programming represents a new stage in the evolution of technology. Listing the simple tool, the machine and then the computational age, he likens these evolutionary stages to 'the direct media of the hand and body – painting – music – sculpture – dance'; 'the media of mechanical reproduction – the printing press – photography – film

– the phonograph'; and the programmable computer, which he suggests is distinct from 'the first two stages of technology [because] it is an information machine without a single purpose' (Le Grice, 2001, p.314). Introducing a computer program enables its output 'to change depending on the data or procedures selected' (p.314). With 'program or programmability', the artistic process is similar to that of 'transformation or translation'. The principle difference is the potential to manipulate information as it is being sent. For the purists, computer programming represents the closest possible interaction an artist can have with the 'essence' of digital media.

The penultimate concept, 'arbitrary access', is Le Grice's re-titling of the computational term Random Access Memory (RAM), and refers principally to the process by which a computer accesses data. Le Grice discusses how this is a non-linear process, since 'the storage and retrieval of information is not confined to simple arithmetic sequence and proximity' rather 'all address locations are conceptually equidistant' (p.315). In order to explain this, he uses an analogy of a pedestrian on a street. Unlike, the pedestrian who has to pass houses numbered 2 to 5 before reaching house number 6, the computer does not scroll through sequential numbers in the same, linear way. Instead, Le Grice states, 'number 1 is as close to number 1000 as it is to 2' (p.315). This has:

...radical implications for art, structures of aesthetic expression and representation. The principles upon which data, information or fragments of the represented world may be combined are only limited by the systems which can be defined for creating links, and these systems are clearly not confined to simple linearity (pp. 315, 316)

This links in to the final process in Le Grice's list: 'interactivity' – a more self-explanatory process, whereby a viewer is invited to become a participant within the work. The process relates to the non-linear retrieval of information associated with 'arbitrary access' because it accords the viewer the capacity to divert the course of any particular sequential development in an artwork. In

terms of experimental cinema, this has particular significance for works aiming to explore or subvert the viewer's sense of objective or subjective experience.

Although Le Grice's argument that 'process' is key to conceptualizing digital materiality (p.312), in order to perceive the 'art' in the 'event', this concept does raise one particularly significant issue, which questions the viewer's understanding of the unfolding action. If a criticism can be leveled at an artist for simply using a pre-programmed software-effect whilst being unaware of its functioning or to what ends, then logically, a similar criticism can be directed at an artwork where a process occurs without any indication as to how it is created, or without any communication as to its significance. Even though an artist may understand the basis behind its effect, or is responsible for its programming, as Chris Meigh-Andrews indicates, the viewer is not necessarily blessed with a similar insight (Meigh-Andrews, 2006, p.268).

Relating this line of thinking back to Dudley Andrew's analogy of turning the 'glass window' to reveal the refractions of light (1976), in order for there to be a sense of tension in the work, it is necessary that there be a situation where an audience has some awareness of the processes that are taking effect in the work. As with Le Grice's *Horror Film 1*, everything that is going on in the work must be available to the audience for the 'magic' to be perceived. A challenge raised by digital media, perhaps because the effects and processes are quite specialized, (and perhaps alien to the viewer who might perfectly well understand that the experience of a painting includes stepping close to a canvas to look at brushstrokes), consists in how to create an artwork where the viewer can be aware of a process taking place, even if they do not understand the details. As Cubitt states:

If audiences are to share in the joy of creativity, and to learn their liberation by means of it, then they must share the creative moment as the artist experiences it: as a living moment of transition from the present to the unknown future (Le Grice, 2001, p. x).

This brings us back to the viewer's perception as a central concern of this concept. Communicating the significance of a process depends upon the viewer's

attempt to perceive the original image – be it a material in its unmediated condition, or a representational image behind its abstraction. Essentially, the viewer needs a reason to see through, or look into, the ‘process’. As Dudley Andrew’s analogy stresses, ‘we would never be aware of [the distortions, mediations and abstractions in the work], if we weren’t ‘trying to look through the window’ in the first place (1976, p.31).

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In defining the research taking place on this doctorate study it is necessary to describe my early practice as a sculptor and installation artist. I will discuss the theoretical and philosophical influences behind my work, and indicate how my curiosity as a practising artist has led me towards developing this doctorate research.

MATERIAL TENSIONS

Before initiating this research project, I created an artwork titled *Residue*, which is a sculptural installation made using an early 20th Century hospital bed. Lying on the bed is a mattress of thick, white fat, spreading the length and breadth of its frame. On its top surface is a raised ridge that protrudes length-ways through its centre like a distended spinal column, while surrounding the mark, and scored all over the rest of the fat's surface, are traces of fingered gestures, which expose the work's hand-made construction. The overall image created by this weighty mass of fat slumped within the bed's support, is one reminiscent of infirmity, bodily decay and ultimately, death. As a material-centric artwork, this meaning is implied as much through the material media used to create *Residue* as it is implied through the work's imagery. This is most apparent in the use of the hospital bed, something that's usual function would otherwise be to support a human body, prostrate in a state of illness and abject vulnerability. The meaning is also implied through the use of the fat, which invokes its own associations through an overtly, organic affiliation with human tissue and flesh. But what is also interesting about using a material such as fat is that it has a tactile, malleability. As a result, there is a possibility for two very divergent appreciations of its visual aesthetic. From one perspective, the fat can in fact appear quite beautiful. Its opaque white texture has a reflective quality that adds a faint shimmer to its surface and the purity of its white colour makes for a strange contrast to its gloopy, messy consistency, which along with its smell, acts as a repugnant reminder to its bodily affiliations. From this alternative perspective, the work's aesthetic can seem as resoundingly repulsive as it may have appeared beautiful on first viewing.



Fig. 4 *Residue* (2005) Emile Shemilt



Fig. 5 *Residue* (2005) Emile Shemilt



Fig. 6 *Residue* (detail) (2005) Emile Shemilt

The realization of this work emerged through an interest in the body, which has been a central theme of my practice throughout my artistic career. As a background to this artistic concern, there are two strong aspects from my personal life that have informed and in some ways defined my interests as an artist. As a child and young adult I suffered from an extreme form of eczema – a condition where symptoms included an inflammation of the skin. A more diverse interest in the body and its vulnerabilities originated through a reflection upon my close relationship with my brother, who is profoundly dysphasic. My brother's condition is a form of brain damage, which he has had since birth and is a disorder that has affected his ability to communicate – both in his ability to generate speech and in his capacity to comprehend it. Where some aspects of having eczema have been described as psychological, my brother's condition is more evidently caused by an actual physical damage sustained to the brain. In considering these aspects of human vulnerability, I was drawn towards considering the sometimes grim relationships between physical processes in the brain and what we construe as being mental processes. This is a line of questioning that of course shares some territory with philosophies that ponder the nature of the mind and the conception of being. Numerous writings on concepts such as Cartesian dualism or epiphenomenalism have debated the body's possible role as the essential axis through which a person relates to the world. Contemplating some of these ideas further motivated me to consider the physical processes underlying what we conceive as mental processes. I extended my interest in the body, beyond a basic sensibility of its physicality, and towards an interest in the creative possibilities that result from conceptualising the mind as susceptible to the same physical laws that the body is subject to.

Drawing attention to how the mind functions in relation to these notions of the body continues to give rise to a number of creative processes and artistic endeavours. One such example is a performance piece by Mona Hatoum, *Look Nobody!* (1981), which involved Hatoum drinking cups of water and commenting in a very scientific, materialist way about the act of micturition. As she describes it:

I was considering the body in terms of its orifices... I was trying to unite the activity of drinking and pissing... I had a video monitor in the space, which was connected to a live camera in the toilet. I drank cups of water and offered every other cup to the audience, hoping to incite them to use the toilet. I used it myself two or three times. Throughout the performance you could hear my voice on the soundtrack reading out a detailed account of the act of pissing, or 'micturition', to use the scientific term. It was like looking inside the body (Archer, Brett & de Zugher, 1997, p.10).

Where artworks like this draw focus to the physical, materialist conception of being, they are, on the one hand, commenting on the body as a complex system of chemistry and organic mechanisms. On the other hand, they are drawing attention to the natural, human conception of the body as something more than that. By performing, and encouraging her audience to concentrate on the experience of micturition, Hatoum is exaggerating a material process that takes place in the body. At the same time, she is asking her audience to reflect on their conscious conception of how these processes take place. While considering this, it is interesting to contemplate the idea that Hatoum is also asking her audience to consider the biological mechanisms that are taking place in that very act of *thinking*.

From a materialist point of view, it may be said that the mind cannot exist without the body and that consciousness cannot exist independently from the electrical and chemical activity taking place in the brain. In our more normal everyday conception of being, thoughts are more likely to be considered as being somehow independent of the material world. The materialist view, and the harsh reminders that physical damage can provide suggests that any conception of the mind as existing beyond the material world must ultimately be an illusion. This has implications for how we conceive of choice and intentionality. If thought processes depend upon chemistry and electrical impulse, then 'freewill' must also be similarly circumscribed. Yet without being qualified to take more than a layman's interest in current research into 'mirror neurones' and their possible relevance to consciousness, I would in any case find it far from

surprising that we have a strong *sense* of freewill: like other animals, only more so, we have evolved as cybernetic systems, constantly processing feedback and *making choices*. Without settling on, or desiring, any dogmatic philosophy of mind and body, I find an arena for my work in the tension between a materialist knowledge of the body and a conception of the self that scarcely feels itself to be bound by these physical laws, i.e. a conception of the self that seems to transcend the material.

In many ways, this is, for me, what *Residue* is about. It is an artwork that draws attention to this paradoxical notion of the 'person' (which could be understood as the unification of the body and the mind) by alluding to the body through the bed and the fat – but at the same time, not actually representing the body at all. In one sense, *Residue* is a work that provokes associations with illness, death and decay; and because they are associations that are typically materialist, *Residue* may be seen to remind the viewer of their material selves. However, it might also be said that these are associations that ultimately, are only brought to the work by the viewer. *Residue* may seem like an image of organic decrepitude – and by inference a work about the body – but it is also, quite pointedly, *not* an image of the body, nor is it even a representation of the body. From a materialist perspective, the work is simply a combination of a bed and fat. It could be even described further as a wrought iron structure supporting a complex compound of hydrocarbons and oxygen. It is a perspective that undermines the assumption that the material 'means' something. In addition to this, it is a perspective that designates both this meaning and its application to the work, as illusions created solely by the viewer. In respecting this view however, and deeming the work as nothing more than a material object, there is in fact a paradox highlighted by this process. The very act of taking a materialist perspective, and denying the work a sense of meaning, suggests that there was an allusion to meaning implied in the first place. The process of resigning oneself to the notion that any attributions given to the bed and the fat are entirely meaningless, equates to recognising a form of tension inherent in the human tendency to search for meaning or association, despite an intellectual awareness that there is/may be no *real* meaning. With *Residue*, this tension is particularly exaggerated through the

ridge on the top surface of the fat. The whole of the top surface is both abstract enough and associative enough in its imagery that a form of confusion can occur between these two oppositional approaches to reading the work. As suggested previously, the ridge has the appearance of a spinal column as well as being reminiscent of scar tissue. It could even seem like a kind of fossil preserved or cast in the material. Again these are imaginings of vulnerability attached to associations of human anatomy and physiology. In the case of the fossil-imagery, this can be extended to an association with death and residual, physical preservation. But the abstract nature of the mark means that it could also be said to resemble none of these at all. Looking at the work in this way, the imagery created through the fat becomes so alien as to be unrecognisable. Of course it is difficult to argue for certain how much the work might be read as partially abstract given the strength of the provocative imagery implied by framing fat within a hospital bed, but herein lies the allegorical tension that *Residue* might be considered to reflect. In drawing a correlation between the materialist approach and abstraction, one might be tempted to suggest with a work like *Residue* given its allusions to the body, that an abstraction from these allusions could be seen to reflect the tension inherent in the human conception of the mind as material. Where the abstraction serves to deny a sense of association or meaning, it is reflective of the mind/body dilemma in that the conception of the mind as physical, equally serves to deny meaning – if only through the denial of choice. The disbelief we naturally find in this denial of choice is mirrored in the tension we find between the abstraction and the allusion. Further to this, is the fact that the abstraction is something based entirely in the material while the allusion to meaning can only be interpreted as having its basis in the non-material conception of the mind.

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As stated in the introduction to this thesis, the tension between an image and its medium forms the central thread of this research. In line with the concepts that I have discussed in the previous section, *Material Tensions in Residue*, I continued this research with a similar aspiration: one which would relate the tension in moving image art to a more philosophical tension inherent in human existence.

THE MEDIUM PERSONIFIED

As discussed in the last section, because its imagery relates to materialist conditions of the body (i.e. infirmity, death, decay), *Residue* is an artwork that expresses a tension between its body imagery and its abstraction. This is partly because its corporeal associations not only express an emotive regard for the human body, but they also allow for a more materialist perspective – something which, without this expressive antithesis, could ultimately identify the work as nothing more than the combination of a metal structure and an organic compound. In considering this complexity between what is perceived and what is interpreted from that perception, I became interested, because of its technological, cinematic, associations, in the concept of projection in psychoanalytic theory. This is something that can be best described as the process of unconsciously putting one's own thoughts and feelings onto an 'external object' (usually a person). When we think we understand someone's actions, for example, or when we believe we know how that person is feeling, the psychoanalytic theory of projection would stress the point that these are ideas that emerge from the subject's individual and personalised perspectives, although they are assumed by the subject to lie within the object. Usually an unconscious action, the process of projection occurs when we attribute our own good or bad feelings and ideas onto another person and imagine how they might be feeling, or when we think we know why they might be behaving in a particular way. A fundamental aspect of this psychoanalytic theory however, is to stress the point that we can never truly experience what another person feels, and that whatever it is that we imagine those feelings to be they will always remain mediated by our own subjectivity.

In writings on psychoanalytic theory then, it is quite common to find descriptions of situations where a person will project his or her own prejudices, desires or fears etc onto another person or group of people (for example, a person might believe that somebody else is a rival or envious, when actually it is the person, himself or herself, who feels that way). This is also a process that occurs when people project their feelings onto external impersonal objects and environments. In an extreme situation, sometimes described as a 'persecutory complex' (Klein, 1997) a person might imagine that by turning red, traffic lights are acting against them. In more optimistic forms of projection, Melanie Klein writing about 'object-relations', states that:

A securely established good object, implying a securely established love for it, gives the ego a feeling of riches and abundance which allows for an outpouring and projection of good parts of the self into the external world (Klein, 1997, p.144).

What is curious about this concept of 'object-relations' (which includes other people) is that once projected onto, as part of the process of perception, an external object becomes an internalised object – meaning that it has been mediated by the subject's perception of it, even when these acts of mediation and perception are unconscious. As a result, it becomes very difficult to maintain a sense of the real external object. And it is this difficulty – or even inability – to remain objective that we might consider to be involved in the way we relate to certain forms of conceptual art, particularly those that deal with the tension between representation and abstraction.

One such example is a form of abstract art defined by Lucy Lippard, as 'Eccentric Abstraction' (Lippard, 1992, p.83). This definition came from an exhibition of the same name, which Lippard curated in 1966, and is used to describe works of art where a form of abstraction was considered to be in sympathy or in tension with the associations that the imagery provoked. In this way, Lippard's reading of the relationship between association and material-based abstraction can be seen to relate to this psychoanalytic concept of projection. With regard to my own research interests, this is relevant because the works she chose to exhibit,

several of them being metallic structures, seem surprisingly organic with obvious bodily associations. It is also relevant because the exhibition came at a time in the mid-1960s when 20th century abstraction had reached a point of conceptualization where emphasizing the material of an artwork was used to reduce the dominance of representation and association in art.

By the time of Lippard's exhibition in 1966, this anti-representational and anti-associational attitude to abstraction had developed through sculpture towards emerging concepts of installation art – typified most obviously by Donald Judd's 1965 paper 'Specific Objects' (Harrison & Wood, 1992, pp. 809-813) – but can also be seen to relate to the arguments of structural-materialist film. In contrast to Judd's attempt to deny any extraneous association at all, 'Eccentric Abstraction' was seemingly dualist in its approach to abstraction. Lippard sought to 'indicate that there were emotive or "eccentric" or erotic alternatives to a solemn and deadset [abstraction, while] still retain[ing] the clarity of that notion' (Lippard, 1992, p.83). In this way, Lippard's 'Eccentric Abstraction' could be seen as an attempt to bring together the purist attitudes of her contemporaries to abstraction (characterised by what would later come to be known as Minimalism), and a more overtly associative or representational way of viewing the work. It is also worth pointing out that it was in this regard that Lippard's exhibition was also credited as being a precursor to Robert Morris's concept of 'anti-form' (Lippard, 1992, p.84) – the idea that abstraction can be conceptualised as 'process'.

The Eccentric Abstraction exhibition included works by Bruce Nauman and Louise Bourgeois, but is probably best known for the work of Eva Hesse, (Hopkins, 2000). Along with several other pieces, Hesse exhibited an artwork titled *Ingeminate* (1965), which Lippard describes as 'two sausage-like, enamel-sprayed, cord-wrapped, black forms attached to each other by black rubber surgical hose' (Lippard, 1992, p.52). The sausage-like imagery of *Ingeminate* offers some obviously sexual associations, but beyond that, the work displays a more ironic undertone. As Lippard explains, the title 'means "doubled, redoubled" or "to emphasize by repetition"' (p.52). However, despite the sexual connotations of the two phallic forms, their coiling together makes any repetition

seem improbable. Two penises coiled together, demonstrates the opposite of an ability to reproduce. But as is typical of Eccentric Abstraction, this work is dualist in the way it can be read because the work is in fact an abstract materialist form. At no point, does the artist claim it to be anything otherwise. As Lippard explains:

I had conceived of this exhibition in terms of the more organic character of Hesse's work... I expounded what I had in mind (and what the artists had subtly denied by their work)... These artists are eccentric because they refuse to forego imagination and the expansion of sensuous experience while they also refuse to sacrifice the solid formal basis demanded... in current non-objective art... a bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus, a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol. Too much free association on the viewer's part is combated by formal understatement (Lippard, 1992, p.83).

When considering Hesse's work in relation to the concept of projection, one might say that the viewer is being asked to distinguish between their associative instincts, thereby provoking two oppositional reactions in the viewer. From the perspective concerned purely with its materiality, *Ingeminate* adheres to the expectations of abstraction because it respects the formal designs of the materialist attitudes put forth by the likes of Minimalism and Donald Judd's 'Specific Objects' theory. However, Hesse's work also sustains an image, which encourages a raw association with something sexual. What makes Eccentric Abstraction successful in this sense, is that it toys with this notion of projection, and serves to remind us that however much we may believe we can function from an objective (or materialist) perspective, we are always vulnerable to being drawn back to our own associative behaviour. It is with this in mind, that we can begin to understand the problem of perceiving the reality of the external object as a metaphor for the conflicts in conceptual art. Somewhere between representation and the extremity of materialism, is a position that recognizes that with an abstract artwork, like Hesse's *Ingeminate*, it is inevitable that the meaning is created by the viewer and projected onto the work.

It is in this regard that I quote Sean Cubitt's analogy that projection 'is a hugely significant metaphor in the ways we understand our relationships with the world and with each other' (Grau, 2007, p.416). In concurring with Cubitt's statement however, I would add that the main struggle in this relationship is maintaining a sense of our own objectivity.

An interesting aspect within this concept of projection is the process of identification, particularly because of the term's association with traditional movie cinema (and literature) studies. In these terms, identification is used to describe a relationship that a viewer (or reader) establishes with a character portrayed within a narrative, which in terms of projection, can be said to take place when a viewer perceives an aspect of themselves in the represented character. At times this can be an idealistic projection when the viewer identifies with acts of heroism or it can be a more negative or 'destructive' projection (Klein, 1997) as the viewer identifies with a represented character's more sinister acts of greed, jealousy or rage etc. It might be assumed that the viewer (unconsciously) perceives the character as an alter ego, but it would be more accurate, as far as psychoanalytic theory is concerned, to stress that the process of identification involves a mixing together of how the character is portrayed and what the viewer projects into that character. And so, having considered how the concept of projection can illuminate the way we relate to forms of abstract or conceptual art, we might then consider how this concept can effect the way we relate to works involving a representational image (particularly if that image is figurative). Again it is the *tension* between these different relationships, that interests me in my work and in this thesis.

A highly influential text relating to the materialist approach in moving image art is Peter Gidal's *Theory and Definition of Structural-Materialist Film*. First published in 1975 as an article in *Studio International*, Gidal's attempt to define the polemics of this practice in experimental cinema reads like a manifesto. For Gidal, establishing a theory and definition of structural-materialist filmmaking was an opportunity to emphasize the potential of filmmaking as a modernist practice. Following similar criteria that Clement Greenberg used in celebrating the modernity of painting and that Michael Fried used to proclaimed in

sculpture, Gidal's theories on structural-materialist filmmaking would specify the materiality of film as its defining essence. For Gidal, the concept and practice of structural-materialism, is fundamentally concerned with the film's physical properties. The attention he pays to the flatness of a photographic film's surface, the grain of the image, the ethereality of the light and importantly, the generated movement, provides a resounding echo to Greenberg's theorizing on the flatness of a painter's canvas and the potential wealth of expression realized through a single brushstroke of paint. Although *Theory and Definition of Structural-Materialist Film* draws attention to these physical properties as well as the technological processes of filmmaking, a fundamental argument in Gidal's concept is in the emphasis he places on establishing a sense of conflict within an artwork that will counterbalance the prominence of the material. I concur with the essence of Gidal's argument: that there should be a persistent sense of tension between what is perceived and how that perception is constructed. Statements like: 'Structural-Materialist Film attempts to be non-illusionist' or that 'a continual attempt to destroy the illusion is necessary' (Gidal, 1975, n. pag.) stress that it is the *attempt* at resolution, which defines the concept of structural-materialism. For Gidal, neither the process nor the perception is preeminent in the artwork, and as with many of the forms of experimental moving image discussed so far, his vision for structural-materialist filmmaking is one that provides the viewer with an experience that shares very few of the expectations of viewing traditional movie cinema. With regard to the concept of projection, Gidal's writing can be seen to provide an appropriate example of this form of tension in moving image art. In particular, we can illustrate the tension in the process of identification from Gidal's writing on Andy Warhol's film *Blow Job* (1964).

The film is representational in that it is a continuous locked-off shot of a man's head and shoulders. It is made up of four separate reels of 16mm black and white film, which played at 18 frames per second, so that the work lasts 36 minutes in total. Typical of much of Warhol's work, *Blow Job* appears to have no linear narrative or dramatic consequence other than what is alluded to in the work's title. Occasionally the man's head lolls from side to side, and his

expression changes slightly, but generally not much happens over the course of the work's duration, and the film ends as unceremoniously as it begins with the man still gazing 'distantly' into camera. This lack of apparent incident, however, is only applicable to the content imagery. For the viewer, there is a sufficient sense of activity in the attempt to sustain a sense of identification with the represented content within the film (i.e. the man), so as to make the work seem at least experiential, if not eventful.

The first difficulty that Gidal addresses when writing about this film, lies in the voyeuristic activity that the viewer undertakes – principally in imagining the activity that apparently takes place beyond the edge of the frame. But there is also another form of voyeuristic activity taking place within the work, something that Gidal refers to as, 'the condition of spectating' (Gidal, 2008, p.6). In a similar sense to Duncan White's description of how Malcolm Le Grice's expanded cinema artworks desynchronize represented time from actual time experienced; Gidal argues that the relationship established between the viewer and the viewed in Warhol's film, is subverted.

Referring to the viewer as 'you', Gidal argues that when watching the film, 'you' are (voyeuristically) viewing the man – or at least 'the film image' of the man – in the 'here and now' (p.5). What he then asks is whether the man is aware of being viewed? Gidal proposes that the man in the film would most likely have known that eventually a spectator would be viewing the work – and also viewing him. Gidal identifies this as a compression of time in *Blow Job*: as the man stares into the camera, it is as though he is staring out at 'you' the viewer that, he anticipates, will be there (one day). For Gidal, this provides the fundamental crux of the 'condition of spectatorship' (2008). It creates a disruption in the subject/object relationship. First of all, 'There is an object' Gidal states:

...that which is filmed. Yet the protagonist – the man seen – is, of course, at the same time also the subject of the film (p.6).

This is further subverted, with the understanding that the object of the artwork switches from the depicted figure, to us, the viewers. Through different terminology, Gidal's 'condition of spectatorship' could be argued as a condition

of identification, which occurs as we project onto the man the thought that he is imagining us, as we watch him. To quote Gidal again:

An antagonism in *Blow Job* is, for example, between you being looked at by the subject, and, through time, a transfer taking place, so that you the viewer *are* the subject and he in *Blow Job* is no longer such, but re-becomes the object (Gidal, 2008, p.33).

Blow Job is a work that encourages us to recognise the processes of our own identification. Experienced in the way that Gidal describes it, we are imagining a situation, where the represented figure is imagining us. But just like the activity that is supposedly happening beyond the edge of the frame, it is essentially something that we have no real evidence for. As with Lippard's *Eccentric Abstraction* exhibition, the associations that we project onto the figure are merely assumptions that allow us to form a sense of identification with the man. It is a point that is continually punctuated by the material presence of the medium. The separation between the four reels of film for example, are marked by flashes of 'ghosting' – a material trace on the filmstrip's photo-chemical surface caused by light seeping onto the undeveloped negative as it is taken from its canister after filming. Instead of discarding these marked frames and leaving them on the cutting room floor, Warhol opts to retain them as a feature of the artwork. In doing so he allows them to act as an indexical reminder of the film's physical form. Furthermore, the ghosting can be seen to depict the compression of represented time in the work. As Gidal indicates, it takes three or four minutes to change a finished reel of film and replace it with a new one, and so, as he also suggests 'we can assume that the breaks [between reels of film] are at least that long' (p.3). Here we can see a conceptual basis similar to Jackie Hatfield and Duncan White's arguments that posit the viewer as the 'subject' of the work, except in this case it is the process of identification that can be recognised as an activity of viewing. In both Warhol's film *Blow Job*, and Eva Hesse's 'eccentric' abstract sculpture *Ingeminate*, the viewer's process of projection and identification is an essential concept relating to the work.

As far as this thesis is concerned however, addressing this concept of projection does not end there, because a further facet of a viewer's sense of identification with an artwork can also be recognised in the forms of personification that take place when a viewer attributes human characteristics to a medium. As the assignment of gender to non-human objects reminds us, the human tendency – or even urge – to personify is a factor of our very existence, and informs the way that we relate to our surroundings. As an aspect of projection, we never really lose this urgency to personify, and structural-materialist imagery may make us uncomfortably aware of the tension between personification and our recognition of material beyond the personified. The following section of my thesis examines this concept of projection, identification and personification in relation to my own practice in digital media.

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FROM ANTI-ILLUSION TO ALLUSION:

Later explorations of tension between the 'image' and the 'material' in Moving Image Art

The art of the 20th Century can be squeezed into the binary oppositions of figurative and abstract, material and non-material, representational and non-representational, but also into that of illusion and anti-illusion, in which the avant-garde defined itself as anti-illusionary.

Peter Weibel (Goetz & Urbaschek, 2003, p.433)

According to Peter Weibel (Goetz & Urbaschek, 2003, pp.433, 434), the practice of moving image art in the 20th Century gradually evolved towards the concept of the anti-illusion: a concept that would take precedence with structural-materialist film and media-specific video art during the 1960s and 1970s. However he also argues that the influence of the avant-garde declined considerably by the 1980s when the art of the illusion returned to the fore, bringing with it the influence of mass media, which Weibel claims 'had developed into the central site for the generation of the illusion' (p.433). The art of the anti-illusion, that 'favoured all the more vehemently destruction and deconstruction [was to] exit from the picture' (p.434).

In taking a retrospective view, Weibel suggests that while the artists working within the confines of the anti-illusion had been pushed to the sidelines and marginalized by limited exhibition opportunities, the reward for the artists embracing the illusion was, by comparison, 'as momentous as it was astonishing'. Meanwhile 'the mass media passionately applauded this phenomenon and covered it excessively' (p.434). For Weibel, this would have important implications for the next generation of artists exhibiting during the 1990s. His argument implies however, that despite these celebrations for illusionary art, the artists of the 1990s still remained influenced by the studies of the avant-garde and the anti-illusion, even if, as Chris Meigh-Andrews and Catherine Elwes have indicated, the work failed to quote its sources (Meigh-Andrews & Elwes, 2006,

p.4). For Weibel, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a new concept in cinematic art, one that could be understood to exist somewhere between the illusion and the anti-illusion. It is a concept that Weibel refers to as the 'allusion' (Goetz & Urbaschek, 2003, pp. 433, 434).

If we consider how illusion is fabricated in cinema, a very simple example is in the portrayal of a conversation between two or more people. If different camera shots are used for each person, what we are often witnessing is the coming together of separate reels of footage: images that could even have been recorded on separate occasions and at completely different locations. Nevertheless, the illusion is such that we believe we are encountering a conversation taking place in real time. In opposition to this, the art of the anti-illusion, which was also anti-narrative and at times anti-representational, explored the reality of cinema as a material construction. It specified the physical conditions of the medium in the here and now, and openly exposed the construction behind an image, as if to celebrate the manner in which an illusion might be sustained rather than simply experienced. Whether this is through abstract patterns of nails and pins photo-chemically exposed onto the celluloid (as in Man Ray's *Le Retour à la Raison* (1923)) or the projected layering of differently coloured film-strips (as in *Horror Film 1* (1971) by Malcolm Le Grice) – in the art of the anti-illusion, it is often the aesthetic inherent in the process of the work's creation that is brought to the fore. Weibel's account of the 'allusion' is a concept that can be loosely defined by its *allusion* to both the traits of the illusion and the anti-illusion. It does this principally by maintaining the representational image, and locating the art directly in the mainstream tradition (his examples include the appropriation of fast-paced editing and imagery from Hollywood movies, music videos and television commercials). Thus the artwork would appear illusionary in its implied sense of narrative or its suggestion of continuity between different shots and scenes, but then, as Weibel describes it, 'these artists [would] deconstruct [these mainstream images] with the techniques of the slowing down or acceleration of shots and soundtrack taken over from the media avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s' (p.434).

In assigning works to his concept, Weibel makes the claim that the viewer inherently possesses a 'library of visual experiences' (p.434), which he or she accesses when viewing the work. Weibel argues that visual conditioning 'from films to billboards' (p.434) is imposed on the viewer by the mass media. When the viewers encounter a work, they are more or less already aware of meaning implied by the imagery. '[The artist] need only briefly suggest topics, places, subjects and the viewer knows what is being spoken of' Weibel explains. 'Little is mentioned explicitly, and the story is still comprehensible'. For Weibel, this creates 'an aesthetics of the given' (p.434).

In the post-modern universe of allusion, it is assumed of any viewer that he knows all the images, and the charm of the reaction lies in the reference to these images, in the deliberate disappointment of expectation, in the deliberate parallelity and conformity, or in the deliberate omissions and ellipses (p.434)

An artist that Weibel briefly cites amid this tradition is Douglas Gordon (p.434), whose video installation *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) can be said to exemplify his argument. The artwork is a projection onto a suspended screen of an extremely slowed down (almost halting frame-by-frame) version of Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 movie *Psycho*. The piece exists without a soundtrack and the imagery is endlessly replayed over and over. A single screening of the movie, from beginning to end, is stretched out and lasts for a very long time. Although it may not last for precisely 24 hours, it is nonetheless realistic to assume that a viewer would not normally watch the whole movie in one continuous sitting: however, as Weibel's argument implies, the narrative elements are still compelling.

Gordon's technique of reducing *Psycho* to such a slow speed unsettles the usual expectations of narrative normally established by the imagery, and if viewers are aware of Hitchcock's original movie (as Weibel's argument assumes they would be), then the artwork becomes especially effective in disturbing the expectation that Hitchcock's original story telling engenders. By contrast however, the rolling imagery is also fast enough (although only just) to deny the viewer the opportunity to contemplate each frame in isolation as though it were a single

photograph. Instead the succession of the images still maintains enough activity to sustain the viewer's expectation that something is about to happen. Coupled with an awareness of the original material, this anticipation can build with each passing frame, as the imagery works its way towards the movie's particularly climactic scenes, to the point where it is not just the movie's narrative that is momentarily suspended but also the viewers' experience as they anticipate the scenes they know are coming. As Gordon himself describes it:

The viewer is catapulted back into the past by his recollection of the original, and at the same time, he is drawn into the future by his expectations of an already familiar narrative... A slowly changing present forces itself in between (Douglas Gordon in Ferguson, 2001, p.16)

This is perhaps best experienced at the moment of the famous shower scene, which is also something that is accentuated by the lack of an audible soundtrack. Instead, the viewer imagines the sound of a scream as they silently view a close-up of Janet Leigh's widening mouth. It is as though the viewer becomes audibly aware through the visual stimuli. And so, we might take that Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* as an appropriate example of Weibel's 'allusion'. The work alludes to the art of the illusion, in traditional movie cinema insofar as it incorporates the original story, but it is also a work that alludes to the explorations of the avant-garde, where the techniques of slowing down and repeating footage are typical of the anti-illusionist works of the 1960s and 1970s.

In terms of my own research and interest in the perceived presence and absence of the human form, there are several works from around this period – themselves informed by structural-materialist film/media specific video art – that have influenced my practice. In Douglas Gordon's video installation *Through a Looking Glass* (1999), Gordon adopts Martin Scorsese's movie *Taxi Driver* (1976) making use of the iconic 'You talkin' to me?' scene performed by Robert De Niro. The character, Travis Bickle, alone in his desolate apartment, fantasizes with a gun pointed towards his own reflection in a mirror. 'I don't see anyone else round here!' he rants, before snatching the pistol from beneath his

coat and taking aim at his own reflection. In Gordon's installation, this scene is isolated and repeated continuously on two screens positioned opposite each other. At first, like a mirror image, the two projections appear in perfect synchronicity, but gradually, as the scenes progress, their timings begin to falter. As De Niro's monologue separates and becomes two, the installation becomes less like a mirror image and more like a confrontation between two divided entities. Gordon compounds the impending sense of paranoia and isolation in Scorsese's original movie, by turning Bickle's fantasy in on itself, and creating the setting for a schizophrenic conflict. 'Who the *hell* else you talkin' to?' comes the accusation. 'Faster than you, fuckass!' comes the retort. For the audience, who occupy the space between the two projections, the work is perhaps even more aggressive. For them, it is almost possible to feel like the subject of the two Bickles' deranged interrogation. As one turns head, spinning around to catch the flying accusations, it is possible to feel a strange sensation that it may be you who is gunned down by the two drawn pistols. In terms of Weibel's 'allusion' and the influence of structural-materialist film, *Through a Looking Glass* discloses enough information to engage the viewer in its emotional meaning, and to refer to the technological material of its display. As with *24 Hour Psycho* the viewer is always aware of the mediation occurring through the materiality of video. The de-synchronization in this work takes place through the gradual diversion of two individual video display systems. Although both are playing the same information, there are two different video feeds constantly looping, and their coming together is as much a function of chance as it is of design.

A further work exploring the viewer as the recipient of an assailant's aggression is Bruce Nauman's *Anthro/Socio* (1992). In this installation, 3 projections and 6 video monitors are displayed in a gallery space. Each projection occupies a different wall, while three metal structures, each of them containing two video monitors one atop the other, are placed in strategic locations across the space. Within each display is the same image of a singing, bald-headed man. The images, framing only the man's head and cropped just below his chin, are set at different angles – some upside down, others the right side up. Further to this, is the man's singing, which he belts out to the words: 'Feed Me! Eat Me!'

Anthropology!' 'Help Me, Hurt Me, Sociology!' The multiple screens and their locations in the space are designed in such a way as to accost the audience, placing them as the target of the heads' demands. These orders are koan-like, deliberately contradictory and paradoxical. The viewer, confronted with the contradictory singing from every direction, is unlikely to identify with the portrayed figure at least until some sense is made of the koan (both anthropology and sociology the logos of man and the logos of society are only ideally pure sciences in reality, they all too human activities, which carry the ambivalences of benefit and exploitation. This is of course only a tentative indication of a koan's possible meaning!). It is a work that illuminates the essentially conditional nature of communication and identification.

A work that is much more accessible than *Anthro/Socio*, but just as capable in frustrating the audience's sense of communication and identification is Gary Hill's *Tall Ships* (1992). (This is also a work that has had a large influence on my practice, perhaps more than any other from this period). Essentially an interactive video-installation, the audience enter a pitch-black darkened corridor, where they are confronted by a series of small greyish glowing lights, lining either side of the passage walls. As a viewer progresses further through the space, these glowing lights gradually, and one at a time, take on a human shape. It then becomes apparent that these figures are walking towards the viewer, emerging from an unfathomable distance in the darkness. The closer they get, the more life-like their dimensions become, until almost suddenly, each figure comes to a standstill and confronts the viewer with their ghostly, black and white presence. Almost motionless, except for the movement of their eyes, it is as though the figures are fixing their gaze on the viewer, causing a peculiar reversal in the viewer/viewed relationship. Instead of nonchalantly inspecting a work, like one might view a painting on a gallery wall, *Tall Ships* subverts this one-way interaction. Like something akin to a haunted house, the viewer becomes the viewed, making one's experience of encountering these almost life-like figures much more self-conscious. After a while, the figures turn their heads and walk away, retreating back into the impossible distance. One or two of them take a glance over their shoulders as if to display their frustration at a

communication that hasn't been received, leaving you, the viewer, feeling somewhat rejected. This disappointment is worsened when the viewer reaches the final figure, appearing on the farthest wall of the corridor. A little girl, who seems to be floating, emerges with her arms extended, as if inviting you to embrace her. But you can't, and eventually, she too, turns away.

Although not from the same era, and in fact contemporary with many of the structural-materialist films, another work that I wish to mention, is Paul Sharits *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* (1976). In this film installation, Sharits' treatment of the medium is sympathetic to the subject matter contained within the imagery. Consisting of two film projections, screened one above the other, within a specially constructed, silver-painted, enclosure *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* follows a tradition of structural-materialism in its concern for 'flicker' and the role of colour. However, the work also marks a substantial renegotiation of the anti-illusionist approach established by many of its contemporaries. Interspersed between different block-coloured film frames, are individual frames taken from found footage of a man suffering an epileptic fit. Framing the man's head and upper-torso, the black and white footage reveals a number of electrodes attached to the man's scalp, indicating that the footage has been taken from a scientific experiment. The 'comparison' in the title, refers to two separate reels of film taken of the patient. The frames edited into the upper projection document the man suffering an involuntary convulsion, while those in the lower film display a scientifically controlled, induced seizure. As both films are projected at a rate of 24 frames per second, the images of the figure flash intermittently between tones of blue, red, yellow and green. The flicker technique, created by the frames zipping through the projector at a faster rate than the human eye can perceive, blends the projected colours together, creating a brilliant white strobe. Around each white flash, bursts a halo of colour as the reflected light bounces off the silver-coloured walls that surround the two projections. But the lasting imagery throughout is, without doubt, the man's relentless pain and suffering. Punctuating each flash with a violent contortion, the freeze-frames linger on the viewer's retina, producing negative, silver and black apparitions that monumentally hang in space before the next image

smashes its way through. Compounding this is a menacing, jarring and throbbing soundtrack. Taken directly from the experiment's electrical readout, doubled up and amplified, the raw glitches and rasping fissures, tear through the gallery space like physical scratches on the soundtrack itself. Inside the viewer's head, the imaginary screams provoked by the man's silent agony further elaborate the work's emotional impact.

Where the earlier works of the avant-garde emphasized the physical form of cinema, these later works combine such explorations with the ambivalent imagery of human existence. They succeed in creating a sympathetic reading between, which occupies the ground between structural-materialism's deconstruction of the illusion and the human conflicts, which inevitably arise from our personal senses of physicality. It is through this capacity to provoke an unresolved, and thereby enduring, emotional reaction that these works continue to employ this tension as a central feature of moving image art. In my own practice, I aim to continue this balance between the structural-materialist approach and the 'allusion' towards more emotional, existential, ideas brought about through the image.

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CHAPTER 3

PRACTICE

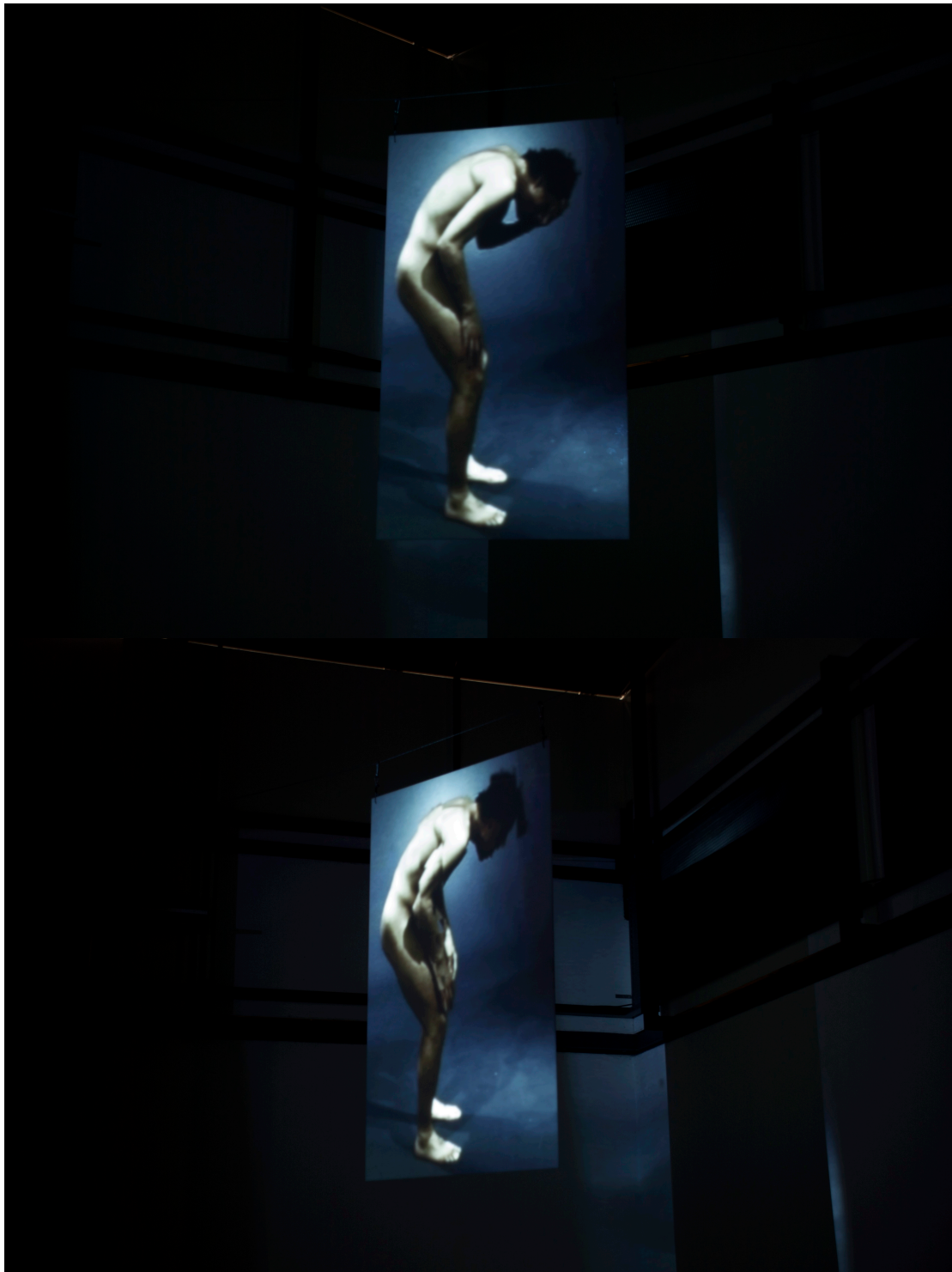


Fig.7 *Chamber* (2006/2007) Emile Shemilt

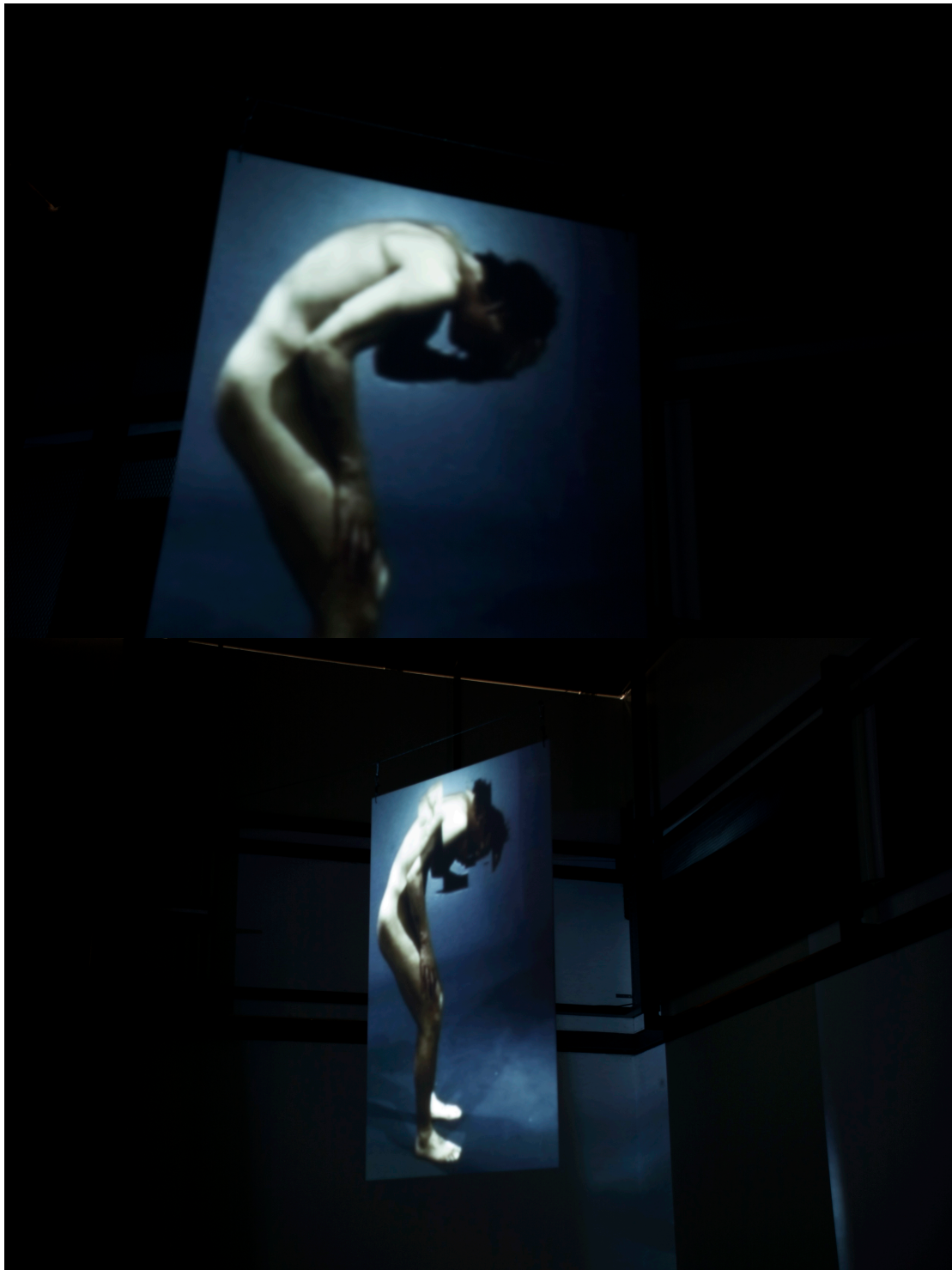


Fig 8. *Chamber* (2006/2007) Emile Shemilt

CHAMBER

The installation *Chamber* is the first work in digital video that I made with the aspiration of exploring the sense of tension between the image and the medium. In this work, attention is paid to expanded cinema at arguably its most basic form – the relationship between the projected image and the screen. *Chamber* is an artwork that is comprised of a digital video projection of a hunched figure onto a two-way screen suspended in an exhibition space at a distant and oblique angle from the gallery walls. Although the imagery from the digital video is representational, it is only when the video is projected against the suspended screen that the work is fully realised as an installation. This is primarily because contemplating *Chamber* as an installation allows the relationship between the projected image and the screen to be established and subsequently negotiated by the viewer. Thus it is immediately apparent that the tall and thin screen is disproportionate in scale to the format of the projected video. Because the video projector outputs its imagery in the standard, rectangular, cinematic aspect ratio, it is apparent that only a certain section of the projected image falls on the screen. By contrast, the rest of the projected light spills out into the surrounding gallery space. This also means that it is only the light, which strikes the screen that is formed into a sharply focused image. The rest of the projected light falls into a formation that is only defined by the strength of the projector's luminance and the architecture of the walls and floor of the gallery space.

Regarding the representational aspect of the digital video projection, it is only the image of the figure that is contained within the boundaries of the screen. As a result, this disproportionate aspect ratio of the screen to the projected image suggests a sense of containment that is not just applied to the projected light, but also to the represented figure. Tightly pressed against its edges, the positioning and stance of the figure correlates to the restricted proportions of the screen. Even with the figure's very gradual movement, its entire imagery remains registered on the screen and does not slip beyond its edges with the rest of the spilled projection. But neither does the digital video image remain intact. A glitch (or digital artefact) in the digital system momentarily scrambles the image into groups of misaligned pixel values, which separate and distort the shape and

form of the figure. But just as the figure does not extend beyond the edges of the screen, nor do the distorted pixels. What is especially curious is that the glitch in the digital code appears to only affect the area of the projected image that contains the figure.

Regarding the central theme of this thesis, which is the sense of tension between the image and the material, there are several aspects to *Chamber* that can be said to evoke this tension. Aside from the image of the figure, there is a pronounced conflict between the projected light and the disproportionate screen. This is mainly because the differentiation between the focal points creates a sense of tension between the implied foreground and background of the image, but it is also because this separation establishes a conflict between the projection and the screen. In doing so, the work draws attention to the visual aesthetic of this relationship. While the focal point of the projection fixes on the screen, the unfocused light that spreads beyond it has a softened and textured quality that contrasts with the precision of the sharply focused area of the figurative image. This is furthered by the variability in shapes that the out-of-focus projection takes as it spreads beyond the rigidity of the rectangular screen. With regard to the screen itself, its semi-transparency allows the image to appear on both its sides, albeit reversed. As an installation, this means that the work can be viewed from a variety of angles, in a way that also establishes a contrast between the front and the back of the image, which within the physical space of a gallery contradicts the illusion of depth established by the image. This in turn contrasts with the notable lack of depth to the almost, two-dimensional, flat screen. Amid this use of the apparatus though, is the sense of tension that is provoked by the image of the figure.

In part at least, the use of the figurative image presents a way of viewing that adheres to more traditional forms of representational cinema. As is typical of a representational image, there is the potential for a sense of identification with the represented content. The bowed head, for example, might provoke ideas of submission or oppression, while the slightly twisted and almost contorted position that the figure stands in, contributes to these associations in a way that might imply a more physical sense of discomfort and suffering. This is an

interpretation that is furthered by the relationship between the image and the screen. With the figure's head bowed, and his body hunched, the screen seems as though it is too restrictive in its height to allow the figure to stand fully upright. Similarly, the same restrictions are imposed by the screen's width, which appears to be too narrow for the figure to sit down in. The implication of this relationship then, might be one that identifies the figure's situation as a form of imprisonment – an interpretation that seems consistent with the title of the work. Furthermore, these associative ideas of discomfort and suffering are continued by the occurrence of the digital glitch. The misaligned pixel values that displace various chunks of the figure's face and body have the potential to provoke an interpretation of inflicted pain or torment. But this is also a point where the tension between the material and the image can be observed. Although the distorted image contributes to the interpretation of the figure's situation (e.g. being in pain) its occurrence is also something that pulls the viewer's attention back to the construction of the work as digital video. This is primarily because the glitch is the result of an error in the digital system, rather than being something that solely affects the figure.

In general technological terms, a glitch is basically the product of an error in a digital or electronic system that leads to an unpredictable alteration or deviation from the value of the signal or code. In the case of *Chamber*, the end products of the glitch are the digital artefacts that appear to scramble the image. It is something that essentially occurred by chance, and was not provoked. At some point in the production process, after recording the imagery onto digital tape and while importing the information onto a computer's hard-drive, a deviation in the communication occurred. This led to a momentary translation of the code that differed from its original recording, and resulted in the scrambling of the image. At this point, the pixels, which collectively make up the image, have had their values momentarily rearranged. Where the code originally designated that one pixel should display a value of black, for example, it might now designate a value of blue or of white or of flesh-tone. The reason for this deviation in the pixels' colour value can sometimes be the result of an additional alteration in the digital video's time-code. This is when a colour value,

designated for a certain time in a particular sequence, is replaced by a colour value from a different time in the same sequence. In other words, when a digital video reaches the 12th second in its time-line, one should expect to see an image where all the pixels are displayed at their designated value for that 12th second. Instead, what happens in *Chamber* is that an array of pixels began to display values from the 8th or the 15th or the 24th second. This is what sometimes happens when a glitch occurs in digital video, and is essentially what occurred in the production process.

The original artefacts from the glitch lasted only a short time – a matter of seconds at most – but when editing the digital video, I chose to isolate these few seconds and slow the video sequence right down, so that on playback the sequence lasts much longer – almost to the point where it reaches a minute in length. The process of doing this involved using a software-editing program that registers each pixel value at each point in time from the original video, and records them collectively as a sequence of ‘frames’ (the equivalent of a still image or frame on celluloid film). In most digital video works, these frames are screened at 25 frames per second. In slowing this sequence down, the software program separates the original frames so that a certain period of time elapses between one frame being screened and another frame appearing in the sequence. Figuratively speaking, the software program then ‘fills the gap’ between the original frames with a number of new frames, which basically mimic the preceding and forthcoming frames on the sequence. It does this by judging the relative values of the pixels in the original frames. If a pixel in the top-left hand corner of a frame has a yellow colour value for example, the software program will note if that value is repeated in the corresponding frame. If the same yellow value occurs in the next frame, but in another location (i.e. activating a different pixel) the software program will (generally) assume that the yellow value represents a moving element within the digital video. It will then recreate this yellow value in the new, mimicking frames. In order to create the sense of movement, the software program plots certain pixels on each frame with a relative yellow value in a similar way that one might join points on a graph. So, if one were to view each frame in sequence, it would appear as though

the yellow value is moving across the image – essentially following the same principles as animation.

What is interesting about this technique of slowing down the digital video (and adding new frames in the process) is that the effect from the glitch is also mimicked in the sequence. Both the glitch and these new artificial frames originate as an uncontrolled product of the digital system and it is important that they are recognised as such¹⁰. As with most of the works that I have discussed so far, the sense of tension is established in the way that we relate to an image amid the presence of the structures and materials that reveal its construction. With *Chamber*, because part of its construction was created by the digital system, there is the potential for a further consideration regarding this sense of tension in the work. This is especially so, if one considers it in relation to the psychological concepts of projection and identification.

In one sense, the effects of the glitch serve as a reminder of the technical process involved in constructing the image. Because of this, it can also be seen to provide a unique materialist aesthetic in digital media – something, which adheres to the values of structural-materialist cinema. Regarding the sense of tension, the occurrence of the glitch in the image can be argued to reflect a similar sense of confusion in the process of projection as discussed in the last section with reference to Lucy Lippard's *Eccentric Abstraction* exhibition. As with Eva Hesse's *Ingeminate*, for example, where the viewer is caught between their projected associations with the object, and the insistent reminder that a 'bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus' while 'a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol' (Lippard, 1992, p.83) the effects of the digital glitch in *Chamber* can have the same effect in reminding the viewer of their own process of projection – something that Lucy Lippard attributes to the 'combat [of] formal understatement' (p.83).

Because the glitch was an unintentional occurrence when creating the work, the viewer's attention is consciously drawn to the unconscious identification that they have established with the imagistic effect that the glitch produces. Even

¹⁰ Although slowing the image down involved the use of pre-programmed software, the effect that this had on the glitch was unpredictable

though the viewer might project meaning into the distorted image of the figure, it is a process of identification that is confused by the acknowledgement that the glitch is simply an error in the digital system. In itself, the glitch does not necessarily represent anything, and the fact that its effects are isolated on the represented figure's face and body is purely coincidental. In this sense, the misaligned pixels reflect Peter Gidal's description of the areas of 'ghosting' in Andy Warhol's *Blow Job*, which 'do not document what is absent – importantly they are not a document of anything. They are the material presence and process made visible on [the] screen' (Gidal, 2008, p.8).

However, regarding the sense of tension in the work, because the rest of the image *is* representational (the figure's bowed head and the boundaries of the image against the disproportionate screen etc.) there is a strong argument for the case that the glitch does allow the development of meaning – however much we attempt to deny it. In this sense, the misaligned pixels cannot simply be discarded as a material process made visible. What is curious about this argument is that it brings into awareness our own process of projection, and with it an awareness of our willingness (or urge) to attribute meaning to something we know is fundamentally material and lacking intrinsic meaning in itself. The reason this process of projection is interesting, is because it embodies the contradictions of this process. Despite knowing that an object is devoid of meaning, we still seem unable to not perceive meaning in that object regardless. For this reason, *Chamber* might be read as a work that reflects our existence as an unconsciously functioning part of the material world.

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In exploring the sense of tension in digital moving image, my aspirations after *Chamber* were to create an artwork where the viewer's sense of identification is directed away from the dominance of the represented content. In the case of my next work, *Disjointed Momentum*, this sense of identification is redirected towards the media of the artwork's construction instead.

DISJOINTED MOMENTUM

With *Chamber*, the materiality of the medium is problematic within the composition of the imagery. Although the glitch in the digital system should serve as a reminder as to the materiality of digital media, the resulting break up of the digital video is also an effect that (conveniently) suits the imagery. As a result, the viewer's sense of empathy for the represented figure is confused by the notion that the digital glitch may or may not possess intentional meaning within the image. Although the imagery in *Disjointed Momentum* is also figurative, my intentions for this work were to reduce the emphasis that is placed on the sense identification that the viewer has with image (something that occurs with *Chamber*), and instead, extend my interests to the viewer's relationship with the processes involved in creating the work. This means that *Disjointed Momentum's* underlying concern – the material nature of human existence – is implied through the material imperfections of the artwork's media rather than its represented content. In effect, the viewer is not expected to identify with the circumstances portrayed by the figurative imagery, but rather empathize with the functioning and capabilities of the specofoc media involved in its construction. Regarding the sense of tension in the work, *Disjointed Momentum* further explores the concept of projection, identification and personification amid moving image art.

Disjointed Momentum is a study in perceptions of movement and sequence. Its imagery reflects early photographic studies of motion in 19th century art, in particular the works of Eadweard Muybridge. This is most apparent in a seemingly sequential alignment of photographic images from a figurative study,

which arranged side-by-side, are similar in composition to Muybridge's pioneering studies. While each image also portrays the figure in a momentary gesture, the visual aesthetic of the images, with their limited tonal range and brownish-green hue, also resemble early monochromatic studies in photography. In their arrangement across the screen, the photographic images have the look of a filmstrip laid horizontally from left to right. As an installation, *Disjointed Momentum* is a three-screen artwork, and when viewing the work as such¹¹, this filmstrip-like imagery appears to extend across all three screens as well.

Because of this association with Muybridge's photography, *Disjointed Momentum* initially appears to the viewer as though the images are ordered in sequence. In contrast to Muybridge's work however, where separate photographs are aligned in an order that implies one continuous movement, the collective images of *Disjointed Momentum* are not progressive or even sequential. Instead, any relationship between one image and another is misleading. A pose held in one image does not relate in any way sequentially to either of the poses held in the images to its left or to its right. Furthermore, as the work is animated, there is a persistent and scattered flickering effect across the whole strip as one photographic image blinks into another at different rates. The effect that this flickering creates is exaggerated by the tones in the imagery, as slightly over-exposed brighter images flicker between darker more underexposed images. As with their alignment, there is no apparent order or pattern as to which image will appear next, nor is there any sense of regularity to the rhythm at which this flickering will take place. As it occurs rapidly across the whole strip, it makes for a particularly fierce array of trembling and twitching imagery, which is only compounded by the three-screen projection.

Beyond the flickering imagery, is a more pronounced sense of motion to the three-screen installation. Where collectively the figurative images are united as one long, horizontal strip that stretches across all three screens, gradually at first, a separation begins to occur. On each screen, each strip of collective images

¹¹ *Disjointed Momentum* can also be viewed as a single screen version.



Fig 9. *Disjointed Momentum* (2007/2008) Emile Shemilt

begins to move from side to side. Having at first appeared symmetrical, the image strips become detached from one another and begin to move in opposite directions. As each flickering image on each strip disappears beyond the edge of the frame, a new flickering image immediately fills the void that would otherwise be revealed at the screen's edge. Incrementally increasing in speed this motion creates a strange optical illusion. As the strip on the central screen moves to the left for example, it appears to merge with the strip on the left-hand screen, which at the same time is moving to the right. While this is happening, the central strip appears to move away from the strip on the right-hand screen and create a diverging effect. This optical effect is then reversed as the strips change direction and relocate the merging and diverging points to the opposite sides of the central screen. Although the pace is gradual at first, the movement of the strips from one side to another increases incrementally until the movement of each strip becomes extremely rapid. The overall effect is something like an inverted zoetrope. Rather than viewing one animated image, the viewer is presented with a range of component parts that even collectively, don't allow for a single viewpoint. Instead the imagery seems entirely disjointed. This does not mean that the work is not visually arresting however, because even as the strips move from one side to another the individual images continue to flicker. Even when the motion is at its most extreme, where one might expect to see a blur (such is the conditioning of film), the high-definition of the flickering photographic elements still maintains a level of sharpness, which in rapid movement, creates for an additionally confusing optical effect.

As inspired by a number of structural-materialist artworks, *Disjointed Momentum* is a study in cinema's capacity to imply movement as well as being a work that purposefully draws attention to the structures and materials involved in creating and sustaining its illusion. The momentary gestures in the poses of the photographed figure, for example, suggest that a forward motion is taking place (or is about to take place). Yet the lack of a coherent order in their composition across the screen, coupled with the persistent but inconsequential flickering, impedes any sense of forward progression in the work. It is a concept that is further explored through the panning effect, where the horizontal strips of

flickering images appear to move from side to side. Although this creates an optical illusion of merging and diverging between the screens, the viewer is not unaware of the mechanisms of this particular illusion's construction.

The principal basis in making reference to Muybridge's photographic studies with this work has been to emphasize an *anticipation* of movement. While the original Muybridge works are series of still images portraying forward motion in horses and human beings, *Disjointed Momentum*, with its unrelenting changes in direction, expresses a much more ambivalent conception of human activity. Although we might consider ourselves as free agents, it is a paradox that we also know ourselves to exist entirely in the material world. Whatever philosophical outlook we may have, we all experience the conflict between our assertions of freedom, and the often, unexpected consequences of our material nature. An adventurous child, for example, might leap into a swollen river with the intention of swimming, only to find that all he can do is to hold his head above water as the river's current swirls around him. *Disjointed Momentum* is an artwork that expresses this struggle by creating the impression of a progressive motion whilst also inhibiting it at the same time. In this case, the material nature of human existence is conveyed through the deliberate use of the imperfections in the media of the work's construction – in particular, the processes to do with the flow of information in digital systems.

The flickering, especially, stemmed from such a process. In creating this effect, the original figurative imagery was shot on black and white photographic film and then digitized (which also accounts for the green hue).¹² When the negatives from the photographic film were scanned into a computer, the digital media used to translate and import the information from the photographic film were set to capture the image at a very high quality. This included settings for image resolution and bit-depth. Image resolution can be best described as a measurement for the number of pixels there are in an image, its value being calculated in 'dpi' (dots per inch), while the bit depth of an image refers to the

¹² Although the actual photographic negative was black and white, when the images were digitized, the film was scanned as though it was a colour negative. This meant that the images passed through red, green and blue filters (RGB). The brownish-green hue stems directly from the information that was mediated by these filters.

range of colours that are available. When there is a higher bit depth, it is possible to specify tones and shades in an image with much greater precision. Similarly, when there is a higher resolution available, there is a greater capacity for detail in an image. In digitizing the photographic film, the resolution was set to capture 1200 dots per inch, with a bit depth value of 16. In terms of still images, both these values are extremely high given that the average resolution for an image that a computer monitor can best display is in the region of 72dpi, while most printed images will measure around 300dpi. With regard to the bit depth, although 16-bit is not necessarily the highest value (24-bit or even 32-bit can sometimes be used), in general use, most colour images imported from a standard digital camera will have an average bit-depth of 8. This high resolution and bit depth means that the memory required to handle each file is also extremely high. Depending on the capabilities of the computer used, such large amounts of information can sometimes be a problem for certain software programs to process – especially if a user is seeking to animate them. This was the case with *Disjointed Momentum* when I imported each photographic image into a software program designed for editing digital video. Taking each of these images and positioning them on the software's timeline function, as though they were sequential frames on a filmstrip, I set the software to 'play' the sequence and cycle through each image at 25 (digital) frames per second. The extremely high rate of information that the computer's hard drive had to process proved too problematic and impeded the software program's capacity to translate the information within the time needed for the images to be played in sequence at the necessary 25 frames per second. Instead, the playback faltered and where one might otherwise expect to view a seamless animation, the outcome is instead stuttering and flickering, as digital frames were held for divisions of seconds before jerking onto the next frame on the timeline. As a result, the progressions in the sequence appear interrupted and inconsistent.

Regarding an interpretation of *Disjointed Momentum* as an expression of the material nature of human existence, such limits in the digital system's capabilities can be seen as analogous to any number of physical restrictions we experience in our own material lives. Similarly, the lack of direction or forward

progression in the work can be understood to extend this analogy. But beyond describing *Disjointed Momentum* as metaphorical statement, there is also a curiosity regarding the way the work affects our interpretation of the digital system. Similarly to *Chamber*, the materiality of the digital media is problematic. With *Chamber* the glitch has an ambiguous affect within the work because it can be as equally interpreted as a part of the image (as something that affects the figure for example), as well as something that is purely co-incidental (a mere after effect). Either way, it brings into question the way we project meaning onto 'external objects' and our difficulty (or even inability) to maintain a sense of objectivity, i.e. an objective perception only of what is present. The lack of progression in *Disjointed Momentum* provokes a similar sense of tension. When it comes to perceiving an activity of process, we associate it with a narrative – a sense of the past and future outcomes. Even when there is a lack of progress or consequence, it remains very difficult for us to disassociate this *lack* from a sense of *potential*. In other words, when something is perceived as missing, its absence nonetheless informs our interpretation of what still remains. In this case, the 'external object' is the digital system, and we might use the flickering imagery to imagine (through a form of projection) that the system is attempting to process the information in order to realize the sequence.

What is curious about this form of projection is that it personifies digital media. In a similar sense to the way the glitch invites the viewer to personify the digital system in *Chamber* (by imagining that its affects are intentionally directed towards the figure for example) the lack of a forward progression in *Disjointed Momentum* encourages the viewer to imagine that this 'attempt' to process the flow of information is a sign of an apparent struggle. Attributing a narrative like this to the digital system means that it is transformed from being an external object to an internal object – despite however much we might appreciate the fact that digital media do not really make any *attempt* to process information at all. The flickering of the images is essentially the end product of a variation in the digital code. Nevertheless, our susceptibility to project such narratives or forms of meaning onto the flickering, means that we are always susceptible to project onto and identify with the digital system, even to the point where we might find

ourselves empathizing with its supposed struggle. This is important because it reflects the way that we constantly project onto our external environment, and are only rarely capable of maintaining objectivity. This is something that is further alluded to in the merging and diverging points between the three screens: the optical illusion engaging the conflict between what we might imagine we can perceive and what we know is an incidental construction.

CORTICAL SURFACES

The third work that I have made in this series exploring the tension between material and image, is a digital video titled *Cortical Surfaces* (2010). It is a work that takes some of its inspiration from Malcolm Le Grice's *Berlin Horse* (1970) – a film in which, Le Grice employed several 'darkroom' techniques, including superimposing two reels of negative footage and passing the results through a series of colour filters. Although such processes were an important influence in the production of *Cortical Surfaces*, (in one sense, the work can be read as an exploration of comparable techniques and effects in digital media) it is actually the tensions inherent in Le Grice's depiction of rhythm and repetition, as well as time and duration, that were of particular interest to me when creating this work.

Cortical Surfaces is a digital video of two figures, male and female, seemingly in an emotional embrace. In one clip for example, the female figure's arm caresses the male's back, while in another she appears to pull at her partner, as though straining to lift his weight. In this sense, the imagery is elemental, and could perhaps be interpreted as a musing on relationships. But aside from this, the work is also concerned with the depiction of movement, and the shots focus in on their slight, momentary gestures. The flow of their movement is then exaggerated by rapid cutting between close-ups on their faces, torsos, arms and legs, which repeat, speed up, slow down and/or loop back and forth. This way, the work acts as a continual reminder of its digital construction – something, which is compounded by the apparent after-effects of a glitch that recur in almost every frame. The distortion this has on the image is similar to that of *Chamber*, where pixel values are confused within the digital system, and displayed out of sequence and at irregular intervals. But where the corruption in *Chamber* occurs momentarily, and is only concentrated in a single area of the image, the scrambled pixilation in *Cortical Surfaces* is prevalent throughout and repeatedly affects large areas of the image. In fact, the distortion is so great that at certain points, the imagery almost appears abstract, and it is only in the

figures' repeated movements that their shapes become identifiable. Because of this, the material has its own prominence within the work and is not subservient to the figurative imagery.

The technique employed in this work involved the use of some coding that was originally designed to isolate certain frames during a video file's compression.¹³ In general, when video files are compressed, a software program will identify a number of 'key-frames' within the video and retain all the information held within that frame. For all the other frames that appear in between these key-frames, the software program will only store the necessary information required to differentiate them from the previous key-frame. In other words, in order to conserve memory, any (unnecessary) information that already exists in a key-frame will not be stored a second time in a different frame. If one were to compress a video file of a bird flying across a blue sky for example, the software program would identify at least two key-frames: one when the bird's wings flap up, and another when the bird's wings flap down. With both of these frames the program would retain the image in its entirety – registering the different pixel values for the bird and the blue sky. But for the frames that follow on from the first key-frame, the software program will only register the information that changes – i.e. instead of re-registering all the same blue values that it picks up from the sky, the program reverts back to the information held in the first key-frame. The subsequent frame therefore will only contain pixel values for the bird that have changed since the previous frame. This way, the amount of information that a video file contains can be drastically reduced. This same approach is adopted by the coding used to create *Cortical Surfaces* except, instead of plotting key-frames, the coding is adapted to only register the moments of change within the other frames (i.e. the different pixels values). The distortion in *Cortical Surfaces* occurs when the data taken from these pixel values, is re-applied to different frames on the video. Essentially, this produces a similar effect to that of the glitch in *Chamber*, which for example, results in pixel values from the 18th frame suddenly appearing on the 6th frame instead.

¹³ Compression is a process used to reduce the amount of information that a files contains

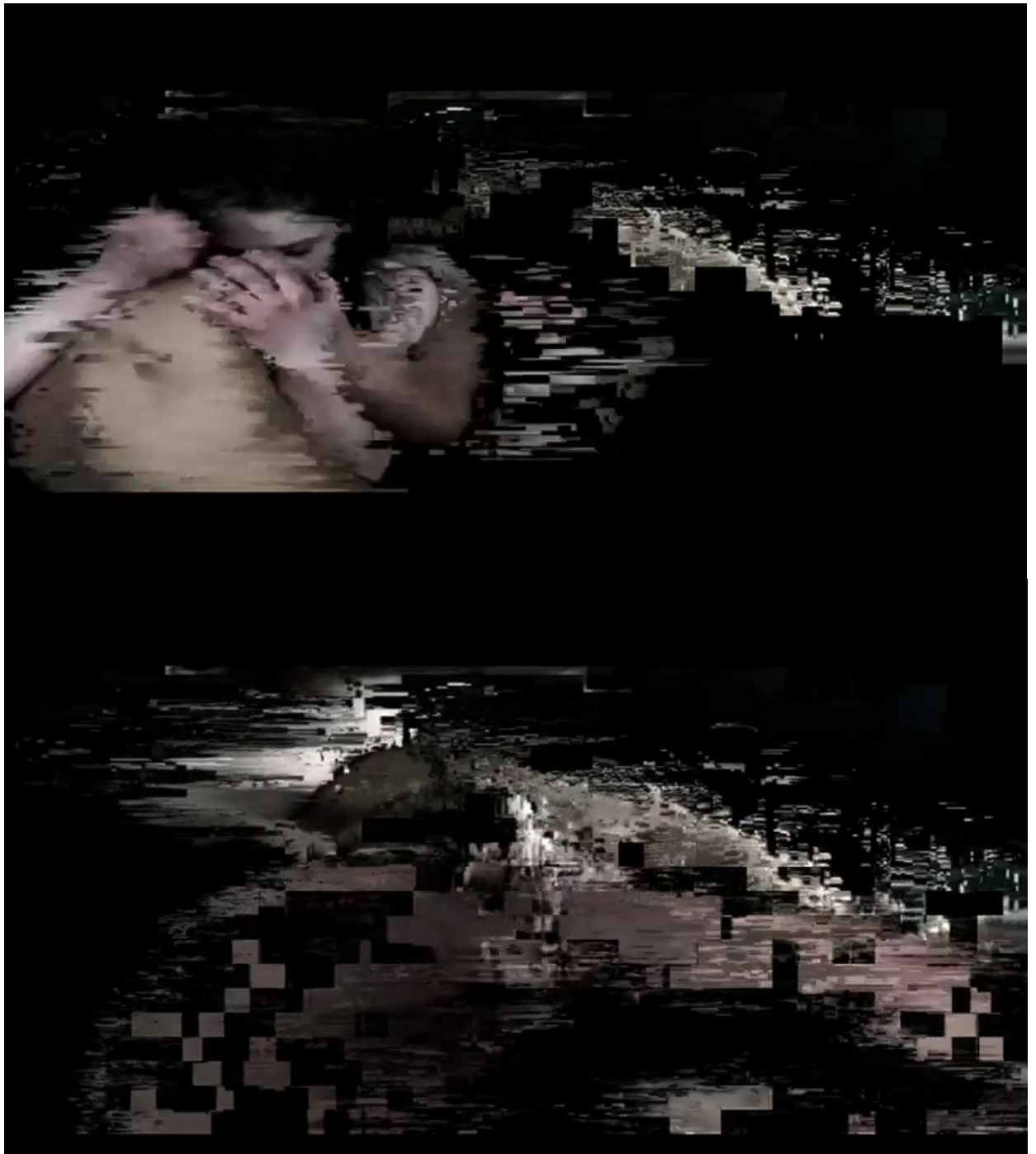


Fig. 10 *Cortical Surfaces* (2009/2010) Emile Shemilt

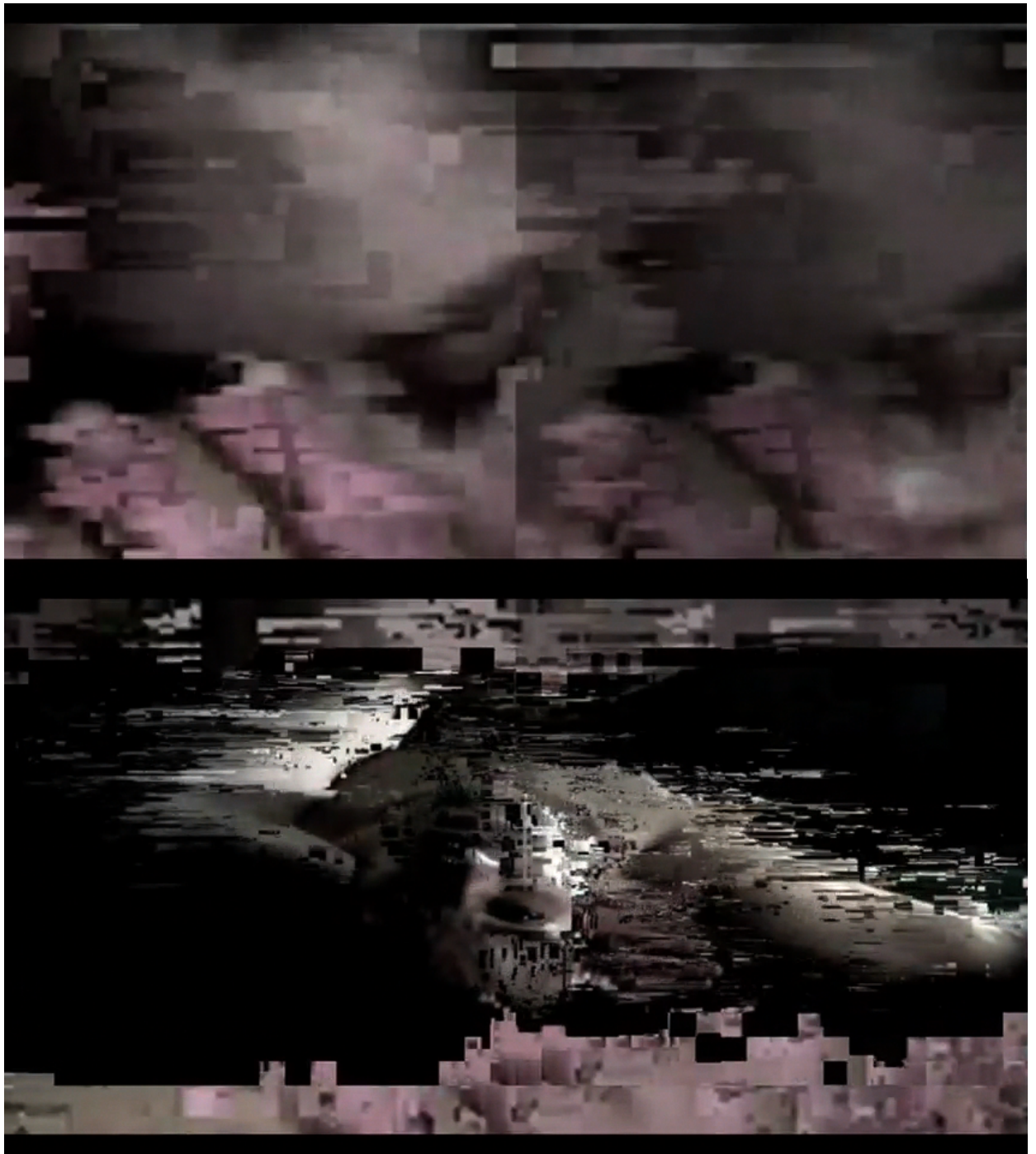


Fig 11. *Cortical Surfaces* (2009/2010) Emile Shemilt

It was by repeatedly subjecting the video clips to this process, that the work began to echo the results achieved by Le Grice when he produced *Berlin Horse*. For this work, Le Grice adapted two separate reels of film containing images of horses: one reel he shot himself and another, which was found-footage from an early newsreel. The found-footage was a black and white film of a horse being led from a barn, while Le Grice's own footage, an 8mm colour film, was of a horse being exercised. In developing the work, Le Grice combined these films by overlaying, or superimposing, one on top of the other to create a third reel of film. He then projected this footage, and re-filmed it from the screen onto 16mm black and white film. Retaining this new footage as a black and white negative, Le Grice then passed the film through a series of colour filters, before re-editing the entire footage, and cutting and splicing between the different reels. The resulting film is a medley of brilliant reds and greens intermixing with the cold blues, blacks and silver-whites of the negative footage. At certain points the film is entirely abstract and all one can make out are the flashes and flickers of coloured frames in motion. At other times, the image is quite recognizable and one can even catch a glimpse of the original footage. For the majority of the film's duration however, the imagery remains somewhere between the two. The horses' outlines are often visible, but the colours that were introduced by the filtering process, bleed between the lines and drown out any definition that might have separated the foreground from the background. It is an effect that Le Grice refers to as 'solarization' (Curtis, 1996, p.110), and it occurs when the tones of a negative image are reversed (i.e. the darker areas appear light and the lighter areas appear dark). The results of which are so varied in *Berlin Horse* that the tone and textures of the film, appear to change from one frame to the next. This continual flux in colour, tone and texture, led Le Grice to conceptualize the effects of the solarizing process, as 'working in [their] own time, abstractly from the image' (p.110). And it is in this notion of 'material' time, that *Cortical Surfaces* relates to *Berlin Horse* on a conceptual level, as well as an aesthetic level. The continual misalignment of pixel values within *Cortical Surfaces* are uncontrolled and like the effects of the solarization in *Berlin Horse*, appear to work in their own time independently from the represented content. It is a tension between the image and the medium that is emphasized through the use

of repetition and rhythm in the shots – something that in temporal terms is at odds with the ‘material’ duration of the misaligned pixels.

Partly inspired by a process Stan Brakhage called ‘plastic-cutting’ (Brakhage in Adams Sitney, 2002, p.157), which P. Adams Sitney describes as ‘the joining of shots at points of movement, close-up, or abstraction to soften the brunt of montage’ (p.157), *Cortical Surfaces* brings together the aesthetic of digital distortion with the inherent rhythms exposed by fragmentary repetitions, and the speeding up, slowing down and reversing of shots. As each shot cycles back and forth, they break apart into groups of pixels. When another shot emerges, the pixel values from the previous shot remain on screen, and become seemingly entangled in the new imagery. There is no apparent order as to which shot the video will cut to next, and sometimes the same one will emerge twice. Although this is also true for the misaligned pixel values, their appearance is intermittent and they linger for an indeterminate amount of time. What is curious about this is that amid this irregularity it is possible, nonetheless, to perceive a sense of rhythm (and by extension, a sense of regularity).

In ‘Rhythmanalysis’ (2004) Henri Lefebvre describes how our observations of repetition can expose this tension between our experience of duration and our perception of time. From one perspective we are surrounded by cyclical repetitions – from our hearts beating to the earth spinning around the sun and bringing with it the cycles of night and day, and winter and summer. These cycles are also prevalent in our day-to-day existence – certain patterns that we adopt, by eating at regular times or following the same route into work every day. From the cosmic to the minutia, we spend our lives immersed in these cycles. For Lefebvre, these repetitions form instances of rhythm, through which we define time and experience duration. But these rhythms are also subjective. Even though as a society, we are united in the way we calculate time, our individual durational experiences of a second, a minute, or an hour are less consistent. For Lefebvre, this is because the human body is composed of multiple rhythms – heartbeat, circulation, respiration etc. – all of which can affect our understanding of duration when we relate to external objects.

Spontaneously, each of us have our own preferences, references, frequencies; each must appreciate rhythms by referring them to oneself, one's heart or breathing, but also to one's hours of work, of rest, of waking and of sleep (Lefebvre, 2004, p.10).

Using an analogy of a midge, Lefebvre rhetorically queries what it must perceive as its wings beat to a rhythm of one thousand times a second (2004). The concept of duration is relative, Lefebvre argues. And when we perceive an external repetition or rhythm, we measure its difference in terms of our own internal rhythms. It is an idea that we relate to cinema: especially in the convention of depicting real-time movement at the traditional frame-rate of 24 frames per second. But this is also something that is explored, and subverted, in both *Berlin Horse* and *Cortical Surfaces*.

CHAPTER 4

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH



Fig.12 Exhibition Documentation of *Residue* and *Chamber*, Emile Shemilt
Centrespace, Visual Research Centre, Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2011

Reflections on the Exposition

As a culmination of the practice component of this research, the three digital video works were exhibited together in a staged exposition along with the sculptural work *Residue* (discussed in an earlier section of this thesis). Artists, curators, students and other interested parties were invited to view and critique the exposition. Through informal discussions taking place alongside the artworks, as well as through a number of reflections discussed at later dates, I gathered a range of opinions and feedback on the practice, both in relation to the research theories I have presented in this thesis and in relation to the visitors' own views and independent interpretations of the work.

In a darkened gallery space, the exposition was arranged with *Chamber's* suspended screen facing outwards from one end of the gallery space, while the works *Cortical Surfaces* and a single-screen version of *Disjointed Momentum* were presented on two adjacent walls at the other end of the space. As the only 'physical' work in the exhibition, it was possible that *Residue* could have had an overly imposing presence in the show. Positioned within the vicinity of *Chamber*, and yet closer to the centre of the gallery, *Residue* was afforded its own point of focus. But because the exhibition consisted mainly of cinematic works, it was notable how the projected light would still pull the viewer towards the moving images, and thereby dilute any cynosure that might come of having a three-dimensional object in such a prominent position. In the dark, this was also something that was aided by the lack of any direct lighting being aimed towards *Residue* itself. Instead, a small lamp was pointed towards an opposing wall as a way of dispersing the intensity of the bulb's light, and allowing a more softened reflected light to gently illuminate the white hospital bed and add a shimmering ethereal texture to the mattress of thick fat. Additional practical reasons for this were so that any light used to illuminate *Residue* would not accidentally bleach out the deep contrasts and colours of the three digital video works.

A fifth component in the exhibition, and one that I have not yet discussed so far in this thesis, has been the use of sound. Both *Cortical Surfaces* and *Disjointed Momentum* were conceived with soundtracks in mind, but the task of exhibiting

two different works with two different scores will often be problematic. Traditionally video works will be separated by soundproof rooms or will involve the use of headphones as a way of isolating the audio of one work, and preventing it from leaking into another. In taking the decision to only use the score attached to *Cortical Surfaces* I was able to take advantage of a serendipitous coincidence that became an important feature of the exhibition. Arranged under my direction, the soundtrack was composed and recorded by the musician and composer Genevieve Murphy. Essential to the score was the layering of several artificial and bodily noises, such as heartbeats and breathing as well as sampled audio glitches and crackles. At any one moment for example, the sound of a heartbeat could create the impression of a hollow echo while a sudden crackle will emphasise the audio's peaking frequencies. Initially the layered sounds seem to follow vague rhythmic patterns, but as the soundtrack progresses, these patterns appear to quickly separate into a series of non-rhythmic, irregular fluctuations. Any identifiable form of repetition or structure to the score is soon lost as these simultaneously sounding organic and alien noises refuse to adopt an organised shape. And yet the sounds produced are also coherently musical. As the different layers of breathing are amplified at alternating pitches, a range of harmonies is created. It is an effect that makes the soundtrack seems both soft and aggressive, and mellow and energetic. In relation to the visual content of *Cortical Surfaces* the soundtrack mirrors the conflict between the representational, figurative imagery and the exposed materiality of the medium. The corporeal noises, for example, are sympathetic to the emotionally expressive bodies, while the peaking crackles in the audio reflect the scrambling and pixilating digital artefacts.

When considering how to use sound in the exhibition, I experimented by playing the scores to both *Disjointed Momentum* and *Cortical Surfaces* together, allowing them to overlap, and then by testing it with one or the other audio tracks muted. The decision to only use the soundtrack for *Cortical Surfaces* was sudden and intuitive. Instead of positioning the speakers beside or behind the screen (as is traditional in most cinematic displays as a way of coordinating the sound with the image) the speakers were positioned high on a gallery wall towards the

centre of the space. Pointed both towards and away from their intended target area, the sound was amplified around the gallery space, almost simulating the effect of a 'surround sound' system. The serendipity came with the realisation that the textured sounds could be associated with any one of the digital video works in the show. The placement of sounds to image was as equally apparent between *Chamber* and *Disjointed Momentum* as it is with *Cortical Surfaces*. A sighing breath, for example, becomes the sound of the glitch in *Chamber* while the beating heart rhythms become the stuttering starts and stops of the images in *Disjointed Momentum*.

Initial responses to the exhibition clustered round the judgement that it had a beautiful almost contemplative atmosphere. However pleasing (even surprising) this was, it of course could never have been the preoccupation of the maker of the work. It was also curious to note that providing an explanation to some visitors before they actually saw the exhibition, led (unintentionally) to some anticipation of a show that would be more aggressive and visually uncomfortable than what he or she eventually found. A number of comments referred to the classical nature of the works – Rodin, Muybridge, and the chiaroscuro paintings of Rembrandt or Caravaggio were among the associations made with the imagery. In terms of the emotional aspirations of the artwork, this would seem consistent with my own interest in the representational presence and absence of the human form. On a formal level, the association with Caravaggio's painting for example, refers to the extreme contrasts between the darkness and light in the imagery. In the more typical Caravaggio works, such as *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter* (1601) or *David With the Head of Goliath* (1609 – 1610) large areas of the canvases are swathed with deep browns and blacks, while pale faces and nude bodies loom out from the darkness. With my own works *Chamber* and *Cortical Surfaces* the figures also appear to materialise from an empty dark void with an artificial light illuminating their features. Yet rather than a portrayal of supernatural gods and legends, the bodies in *Chamber* and *Cortical Surfaces* are neutral, symbolic only of human physicality. But perhaps this too, is where another association emerges.

A characteristic success in Caravaggio's work is the way he portrayed Christian and Greco-Roman mythology as something the viewer could relate to on a human level. Rejecting the transcendent beauty as depicted in the works of the Old Masters', Michelangelo or Raphael, Caravaggio's portrayals of celestial beings were brought down to earth. He painted gods as he saw people: tired and squalid. Bacchus the god of wine, in (Caravaggio's self-portrait) *Young Sick Bacchus* (1593), for example is depicted with features that are notable for being far from conventionally sublime. Putrid tones of green, yellow and grey besmirk the flesh of an otherwise pure-bodied god. It was a far cry from the remote, perfectly formed giants depicted by many of his contemporaries. As Simon Sharma remarks:

Caravaggio's faith is carnal. His bodies are trapped in flesh, even when they are the son of God. But wasn't that the point of the Gospels? Christ's presence on earth, not as a weightless angel, but in the flesh of man? (Sharma, 2006)

The tension in Caravaggio's work is between his depiction of the supernatural and the everyday. His portrayal of the calling of Matthew (*The Calling of Saint Matthew* – 1599-1600) takes place in a typical, late 16th century Roman tavern. Matthew and the tax collectors are dressed in conventional Renaissance attire, while Jesus' allusive shape, submerged by shadow, points an outstretched finger below a shaft of golden light that streams forth into Matthew's alarmed expression. This conflict between the realistic and the supernatural marks Caravaggio's success. It is as though he wanted his viewers to experience the painting as a real event, thereby compounding the impact of the amazing unreal light. Such religious imagery depicted in other Renaissance works seems detached by comparison. Caravaggio's spectacle on the other hand, is made almost tangible, lying only just beyond the viewer's grasp. In portraying the gospels in this way, Caravaggio was encouraging his viewers to be at one with the events and experience the religious ecstasy for themselves. But this conflict is mirrored the other way too. In *The Death of the Virgin* (1606) Caravaggio's Virgin Mary is all too human. With only a faint halo to indicate her holiness, Caravaggio paints Mary's body slumped and with notably aged and greenish,

deceased flesh. Such a portrayal of Mary's death was controversial, not least since Christian dogma at the time suggested that Mary did not in fact die, but was spectacularly taken up to heaven whilst still living ¹⁴. With Caravaggio's work, the tension is not simply in a depiction of God in human form, but stating the presence of a human vulnerability in God.

Although it would be hideously portentous to make any claims suggesting emulating the genius of Caravaggio, it can be admitted that this tension between the realistic and the supernatural represents another version of the tensions between the ethereal and the material that interest me. In *Chamber* and *Cortical Surfaces*, the ideas are not in any way religious, but exploring how the allusive digital images (i.e. the represented figures) become material is a key concern. In Caravaggio's work, the supernatural is given weight through a naturalistic depiction of human flesh. In these digital video installations the realism already exists by virtue of the recorded image (i.e. the works adopt the human presence of their real life subjects). But in terms of the tension, described by Peter Gidal as existing 'between material flatness, grain, light, movement and the supposed reality that it represents' (Gidal, 1976), these digital images would not possess the same sense of the physical material as structural-materialist film, or indeed of a painting, if it were not for the use of pixilation. For me however, their success is not based simply on making the material apparent. It is also in the potential emotions evoked *through* the use of figure(s). In light of Caravaggio's religious icons bearing the weight of human physicality, the viewer can relate to the figures in *Chamber* and *Cortical Surfaces*, not only because they seem ethereal, but because they also seem to bear the weight of their own materiality.

Residue was seen to offer something rather a different manifestation of this tension between the associative and the material. The physical presence of the three-dimensional object suggests the weight of a figure, but its form is only represented by an emblematic, sculpted vertebral column. With this work, the human presence is ethereal and was almost entirely supplied by the viewers'

¹⁴ In other famous portrayals of Mary's Assumption, such as Titian's *Assunta* (1516-18), Mary is depicted still living, in the beauty of youth, being carried atop a cloud of resplendent cherubic angels into the outstretched, welcoming arms of God.

projections. As viewers, our associations, our identifications, and our perceptions of history are projections, and if the work succeeds in eliciting these projections, it also invites us to become aware of our own material/non-material conflicts.

Whether the viewer was consciously aware of this psychological process or not, was not an essential factor in responding to the artwork. The success of the exhibition did seem to rely on viewers' perceptions of conflict between the presence and absence of the human form. For me as an artist as well as a researcher this is a key issue. As indicated in the opening sections of this thesis, although the work is indebted to the research, it cannot be entirely defined by it. Ideally the artwork should be able to exist independently of the theories that underpin it and for this reason, I was interested in responses from those uninfluenced by my field of specialist research. Their feedback indicated that the emotions I wished to explore were successfully conveyed. It was apparent to almost all viewers that the frailty of the human form was the essence of the exhibition. With this link to something universally identifiable, the work was also able to convey the materiality (or the fragility) of the digital media that was used to create it.

Additional Thoughts:

Curatorial feedback included the suggestion that the space might be divided between two adjoining rooms. This could create a situation where the viewer would be encouraged to move around the exhibition space in one particular direction. Thus, as the artist, I could gain more control over the order in which the works were viewed. This could also have been chronological, with *Residue* and *Chamber* occupying one room and *Disjointed Momentum* and *Cortical Surfaces* in the other. If I were to explore this in any future exhibitions, then the silence of *Residue* and *Chamber* could complement each other in a more sombre setting, while the energies of the other two digital works could interact independently. It was also noted, that by lowering the screen of *Chamber* to ground level, it could be seen as a freestanding work rather than one suspended above eye-level; this could further intensify the sense of containment portrayed

in the work. For the viewer, this would mean bearing down upon the figure, rather than gazing up towards it. These are cogent comments, but directing the viewer to that extent may be alien to my character; autonomy also seems to me a precarious possession, and I value both my own autonomy and that of the viewer.

One issue that was raised several times was the perceived 'liveness' of the digital corruption in *Disjointed Momentum* and *Cortical Surfaces*. Because both the works were created through a process of inhibiting the data-flow, some viewers were keen on identifying this occurrence during the exhibition, as though it were happening there and then. In fact small versions of the corruption *were* happening live, but not in a way that could be apparent to the viewer. To present the works, I had chosen a particular software program that was compatible with the hardware used for exhibition purposes. It was a relatively old program (by about 3 or 4 years), which meant that discrete levels of this stuttering in the data feed were maintained. However, by this point in the research, it had also been important for me to preserve a level of control over the image. Although I had provoked the corruption to take place during the work's construction, I had also passed it through several technological processes, testing different techniques numerous times, until I found a visual effect that (I felt) achieved the desired outcome. Of course, circumstances of serendipity were an integral aspect of this process, so my mental image of what the work might look like was constantly shifting. Nevertheless, once I had located an effect that I not only felt would propel the research but with which I was also satisfied artistically, I recorded the results; and these were incorporated in the final work.

This issue of 'liveness' however, does raise the question of the authenticity of such corruption. But this is an issue that has existed in art theory for some considerable time, particularly in the discussion of performance art in relation to its documentation. A useful essay in this regard is Philip Auslander's *The Performativity of Performance Documentation* (2006). Auslander asks what difference documentation makes to our understanding of performance art. He asks this in relation to Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) – a work that now exists as a series of photographs documenting a performance wherein the artist was

literally shot in the arm – and Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Void* (1960) – a staged, and later manipulated, photograph of Klein throwing himself from the first floor window of a street-side building. The principal similarity between these works is that, although both originally performed, they exist now as iconic photographs. However, their essential difference is that *Shoot* documents a real event, while *Leap into the Void* does not. Klein’s jump – which Auslander suggests is at least *a kind of performance*¹⁵ – was made using a safety net, which was later removed using darkroom photographic techniques. For Auslander, even though the contrast between these works raises issues of authenticity, the notion of an autonomous is challenged as unhelpful ideology. Referring to *Shoot*, Auslander argues that an artist’s requirement to stage his or her performance for camera as well as for an immediately present audience, means that documentation cannot simply be treated as subsidiary form of access to the real event:

No documented piece is performed solely as an end in itself: the performance is always at one level raw material for documentation, the final product through which it will be circulated and through which it will inevitably become identified (Auslander, 2006, p.3)

For Auslander, even though the imagery of Klein’s *Leap Into The Void* is doctored, the intentions of the photographs are the same. Asking if ‘our appreciation of Klein’s image is sullied by the fact that he erased the safety net from the photograph?’ (p.8); and whether our perception of Burden’s work would change, if we were to find out that there was no audience present, that Burden simply documented himself being shot in an empty gallery (p.7); Auslander argues that our reading of the works should not, necessarily, be affected. Even though it is often only a relatively small audience who are privy to an artist’s live performance, for the later, potentially much wider audiences, there is only the documentation to go by. And if an artist presents this documentation as the

¹⁵ Auslander refers to the Beatles album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), making the point that, if Klein’s *Leap into the Void*, cannot be treated as ‘true’ performance, then neither can the Beatles’ album. The basis for this analogy is that the music recorded on the album is a construction of performed instruments and post-production studio techniques. For the purist, what one hears on the album, was never *really* performed by the band. For Auslander, however, any such claim is absurd: ‘Of course the Beatles performed that music – how else are we to understand it, if not as a performance by the Beatles? And of course Yves Klein performed his jump’ (Auslander, 2006, p.8).

performance, then it is simply up to the audience to determine authenticity. Interesting disputes will still arise when a viewer's concepts of authenticity are challenged (i.e. Does an authentic performance require a live audience? Can post-production techniques be used to alter the documentation?).

A third work that Auslander brings into the debate is Vito Acconci's *Photo-Piece* (1969). Exhibited in a gallery, the work simply exists as 12 black and white photographs hung in a 4/3-grid formation. Depicted in the photographs is a stretch of the same empty street in Greenwich Village, New York: each photo revealing a further progression down this street from its previous image in the grid. Below the grid, in vinyl lettering on the gallery wall, is Acconci's statement:

Holding a camera, aimed away from me and ready to shoot, while walking a continuous line down a city street. Try not to blink. Each time I blink: snap a photo (Acconci in Auslander, 2006, p.4).

By referring to this work, Auslander further stresses this ambiguity between a performance and its documentation. *Photo-Piece* serves the same purpose as *Shoot*, in the sense that it invites the audience's imagination to reconstruct the performance. Yet, as a series of photographs taken *by* Acconci, rather than photographs *of* Acconci, the work is also reminiscent of *Leap into the Void*. This is because the performance is not available to an audience other than through its documentation. This becomes conceptually intriguing when one recognises the 'performativity' of the documentation. In other words, when the documentation is the *only* access to the performance. On the question of ideology, Auslander's conclusion remains consistent:

It was through the acts of documenting and presenting the documentation that Acconci assumed responsibility to the audience. It is crucial that the audience in question is the one that perceived his actions solely by means of the documentation rather than the incidental audience that may have seen him walking and photographing on Greenwich Street. It is this documentation – and nothing else – that allows an audience to interpret and evaluate his actions as a performance (Auslander, 2006, p.6)

To relate this back to the perceived 'liveness' of *Disjointed Momentum* or *Cortical Surfaces*, and the question of authenticity, I suggest that the quantity and nature of documentation legitimately remain the responsibility of the artist. Contemplating the authenticity of the digital corruption is an issue for the audience, another layer of tension in the viewer's process of projection.

References:

Auslander, Philip (2006) 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art, [online] PAJ 84 (Volume 28, Number 3) pp. 1-10 (article), Available at: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/performing_arts_journal/v028/28.3auslander.html#authbio [Accessed 7th May 2011]

Sharma, Simon (2006) in 'Caravaggio', Simon Sharma's Power of Art, 2006, BBC Video



Fig.13 Exhibition Documentation of *Cortical Surfaces*, *Disjointed Momentum*, and *Residue*, Emile Shemilt, Centrespace, Visual Research Centre, Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2011

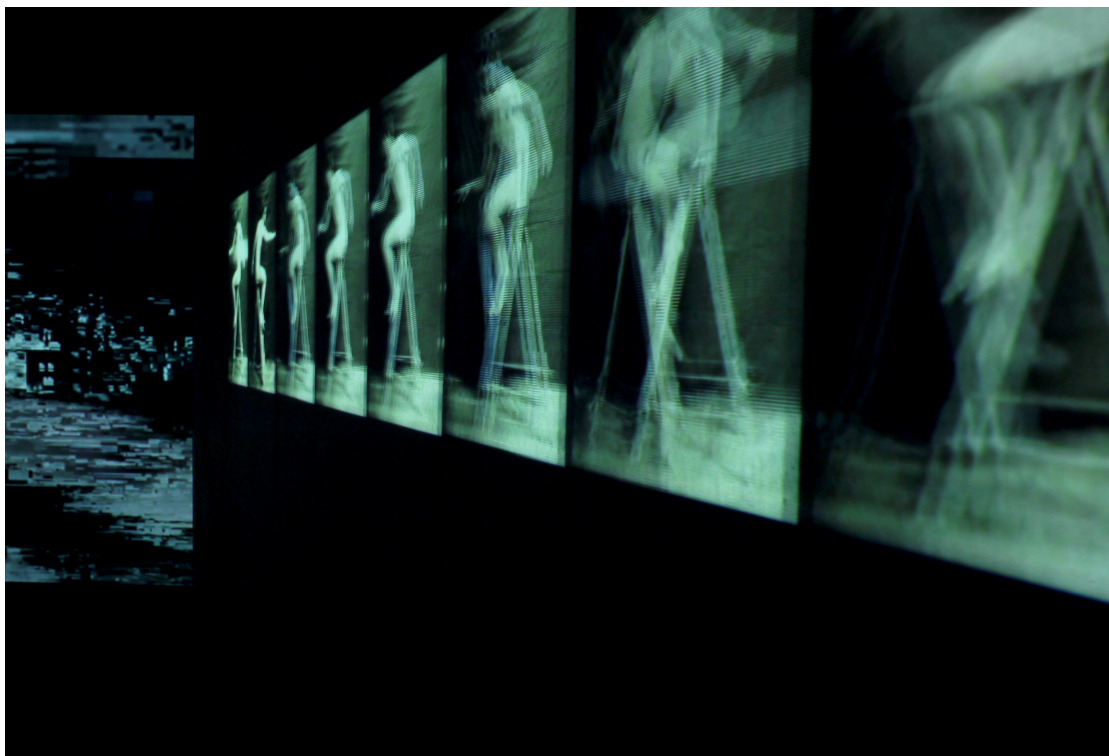
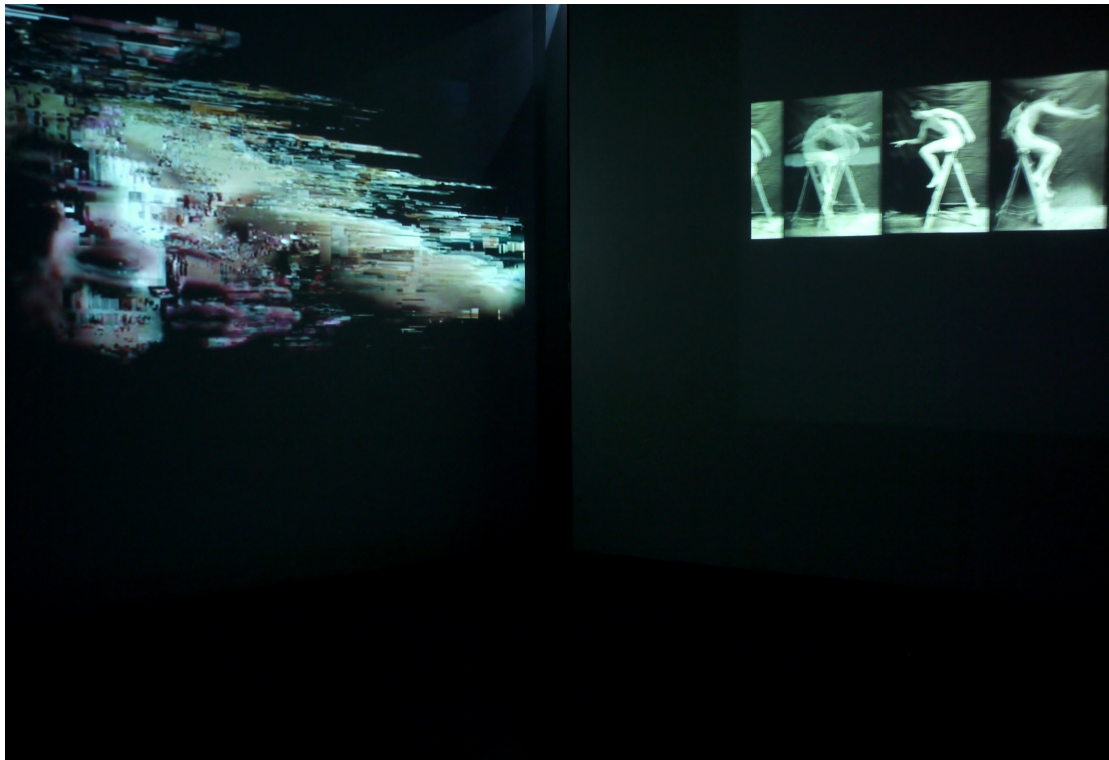


Fig.14 Exhibition Documentation of *Cortical Surfaces* and *Disjointed Momentum*,
Emile Shemilt, Centrespace, Visual Research Centre,
Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2011

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH

In summarizing this research, I refer back to Jackie Hatfield's assessment of the histories and theories of experimental film and video. Her statement that 'the ascendancy of any one theory, history or lineage ... is due to the scarcity of writing relative to other art forms' (Hatfield, 2004, p.14) is a critical position that suggests a revision of the way we conceptualize moving image art. The texts that I have produced for this thesis are a way of advancing this revision.

In the background chapter, I question the viewer's perception of tension in abstract cinema. By cross-referencing structural-materialist concepts with the writings of Clement Greenberg, Donald Judd and Michael Fried, I was able to draw ideas from abstract sculpture, which not only informed my own research into the viewer's role in perceiving tension, but can also be used to enhance our interpretation and experience of moving image art.

By following Hatfield's own research into expanded cinema, I have indicated how cinema as art can be conceptualized in relation to narrative. Malcolm Le Grice's comments on narration (Le Grice, 2008, no page number), for example, can be understood as the 'art of story-telling' and it is from this art form (perhaps the oldest of them all) that we can ideate the plasticity of cinema in new ways. Particularly relevant to my own research, is Duncan White's account of 'narrativity' (White, 2009, no page number). The viewer's activity in perceiving/constructing narrative from a restricted number of elements relates to the interpretation of 'meaning' in literature and poetry, for example, where it is customary to explore the ambiguity of vocabulary. For me, this ambiguity is what provides the opportunity for tension, while the viewer's *attempt* to interpret is what sustains the tension.

Cinema is still a relatively young art, and recognizing that its concepts can be explored, renewed and even discovered in relation to other arts is an exciting prospect. It enables one to argue for an eclectic rather than a prescriptive approach to the moving image. And so, recognizing that the tensions I welcome

in this research have analogies in other art forms, I felt well placed to examine them in example of my own practice as an artist and in related works.

Relating the viewer's perception of tension in cinema as art to my own interests in the represented presence and absence of the human form enabled me to establish a theoretical framework, useable rather than dogmatic, for the way we conceive our material selves. The tension created by acknowledging the materiality of our bodies and also making the (unsustainable) attempt to imagine our minds in the same physical terms reflects the way we tend, at least initially, to be more comfortable the illusionary aspects of cinema rather than its material properties.

Developing the research into the viewer's role in perceiving tension, I was able to relate my own practice in moving image art to psychoanalytic theory – indicating that the viewer's process of 'projection' is vital to the sense of tension in an artwork because it reveals a conflict between what is *seen* and what is *perceived*.

To conclude then, well beyond merely recognizing elements in what is displayed, the viewer plays a vital role in perceiving the tension between the material and the image in moving image art. I have used the following chapter, 'Developments on the Research' to argue the persistence of tension in other artworks, keeping in my mind the rich possibilities of Jackie Hatfield's desire to review the concepts of moving image art in relation to other 'paradigms' (Hatfield, 2004).

CHAPTER 5

DEVELOPMENTS ON THE RESEARCH

DEVELOPMENTS ON THE RESEARCH

As Peter Gidal's writing on *Blowjob* (1964) indicates, the art of Andy Warhol was an important influence on the development of his theories, especially those which relate to the concept of tension between the image and the medium in moving image art (Gidal, 2008). From my own perspective however, Warhol's work is also significant in illustrating the concept that I have argued so far in this thesis: that it is the viewer's identification with the materiality of the medium that renews this tension. In this text, I shall indicate that a tension can also be found in some of Warhol's screen-prints – in particular *Suicide* (1962) from his *Death in America* series (1962/1963). In this work, which depicts a figure falling from a building, presumably to his death; a horizontal white mark – an extraneous result of the printing process – is scored through the image, interrupting the trajectory of the figure's fall. Remarking on a description of this mark by Peggy Phelan as a 'net we cannot see' but which we might imagine will catch the fall (Jones and Stephenson, 1999, p.226)

Warhol's work might seem to be a dubious byway of testing for the argument of my thesis. Warhol dismissed ideas that he was interested in setting up any sort of interaction with those who might view his work, often trying to minimize his creative role. It seems sensible to look initially at the supposed indifference to his image(s) attributed to Warhol himself and to suggest a context for some of Warhol's apparently dismissive statements. Robert Hughes stresses that Warhol always maintained that the photographs used in these works, 'just happened to be lying around' (Hughes, 1971). This apparent detachment towards the shocking nature of these images of death supports a perception of Warhol's aloof personality – an idea that Gidal has implied is also a factor in the interpretation of his work (Gidal, 1991, p.14). I shall discuss how this characteristic of Warhol's persona adds a further dimension to the tension sustained by the viewer's projected 'meaning'. That this persona was deliberately presented seems beyond doubt and is strengthened by a suspicion that some of Warhol's most dismissive comments have their origin in far from naïve theoretical considerations.

Warhol: Empathy and *Death in America*

Here, Warhol was saying, is the world you inhabit but do not see.

High art is your escape route from its crudities. But why escape?

Why not accept it as your cultural ground? (Hughes, 1971)

There are a number of interpretations of Warhol's art, like those of Robert Hughes for example, which focus on his mass-produced screen-prints of mundane consumerist items and describe them as the result of an indiscriminate and impersonal attitude (Hughes, 1971). As Thomas Crow states, Warhol's choice of imagery, from car-wrecks and soapboxes to portraits of celebrities, has demonstrated his relationship with his subject matter to be of 'little interest beyond the observation that in their totality, they represent the random play of a consciousness at the mercy of the commonly available commercial culture' (Michelson, 2001 p.49). Although these interpretations are primarily intended to give the reader an insight into Warhol's art, they are also attempts to understand Warhol's own motivations behind the work's creation, and as Hughes' statement reflects, they also anticipate what he was attempting to 'say' with his work. Even the criticism of the everyday that is implied in the *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) is tinged with speculation of Warhol as a critical observer, or even as a calculated exploiter, of American commercial culture. As this quote by Robert Hughes demonstrates:

Warhol adapted the means of production of soup cans to the way he produced paintings, turning them out en masse - consumer art mimicking the process as well as the look of consumer culture.
(Hughes, 1971)

Although this biographical approach to art criticism is nothing new, and has no doubt existed since at least Giorgio Vasari wrote his 'Lives of the Artists' in 1550, we have become more cautious about importing deductions from the life into the reading of the work. But what is intriguing in this criticism of Warhol's work, is the fact that Warhol himself would maintain a position of complete indifference when any attempt was made to analyze his work beyond their literal surface

qualities. He would retort with statements like, 'If you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There's nothing behind it' (Warhol in Michelson, 2001, p.71). Yet despite this insistence that there is nothing to be found to this insistence that there is nothing to be found behind the surface, the clarity with which one might expect to view his work becomes increasingly instead clouded by conceptual peculiarity. It is undeniable that the indifference that Warhol displayed as a person has become a factor in the interpretation of his work. As Peter Gidal explains:

An artist must be judged by his art, but Warhol's art and his person are closely linked. The contradictions of his life fit the contradictions of his art, and vice versa. Elements of the blurred border between the serious, the pathetic, and the put-on and the put-off, exist in both (Gidal, 1991, p.14).

Gidal's is an argument that presents Warhol's art as intertwined with his personality, or at least the personality he was so careful to promote in public. In one sense, Warhol's work can be seen to embrace Sol Le Witt's notion that 'in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect' (Harrison and Wood, 1992, p.834). But in this case, there is an additional concept that asks what exactly is that idea? The ambiguity that Warhol displayed with statements like 'I want to be a machine' (Harrison and Wood, 1992, p.732) for example, contribute to the perceived tension in the work. Warhol's denial of meaning (or at least his refusal to divulge any meaning), acts as a further reminder that interpretation is a process requiring the viewer's 'projection'. It is a concept that is perhaps at its most complex with Warhol's *Death and Disasters* series from 1963 to 1965 – a series of screen-prints, which depict, among other disasters, repeated images of car-crashes and their mutilated victims. In these works, images transferred from photographs are screen-printed onto canvases, with each image on a separate canvas, repeated until the transferred ink gradually dilutes the original image into an abstract form. Because of the power of the images, Warhol's *Death and Disasters* series are often associated with a stern warning that the over-exposure of violent images has numbed society's capacity

for shock: the gradual dilution of the image into abstraction mimicking this over-exposure.

As if to embody this desensitization, Robert Hughes states that Warhol always maintained that the photographs used for the series 'just happened to be lying around' (Hughes, 1971). And yet, even though Warhol implied these photographs were never deliberately sought out, he would pass no comment on any suggestion that his prints in any way referenced an overexposed society. He would offer 'neither approval nor disapproval' (1971). His own sensibility towards these images would remain one of sustained objectivity. Conceptually therefore, any interpretation of the work as 'emotional', is automatically thrown into question.

The article in which Robert Hughes cites Warhol's indifference to the source material of his *Death and Disaster* series was published as a review of Warhol's then retrospective exhibition at The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in 1971. The review emphasized the artist's mass-productivity as the conceptual basis of his practice. For Hughes, Warhol's profusion of work came from 'a principle of repetition and meaningless abundance' while his philosophy seemed to be 'a literal belief in the endless reproducibility of art' (Hughes, 1971). When Warhol's early screen-prints of money and movie stars were gaining their first notoriety in the early to mid 1960s, Hughes admits to believing, that they must have been produced with a deliberate sense of irony, reading them as 'an indictment of consumer culture' because 'it was deemed improper for an artist to be so drawn to what was decadent, ephemeral or trashy' (1971). But the perception he had developed by the time of writing this article, was influenced much more by a notion of Warhol's 'aesthetic of noninvolvement' – an absolute denial of any agenda, ironic or otherwise, that might constitute a form of emotional expression. The essence of Hughes' theory being that it was Warhol's persona, as much as his art that became 'an exploration of impersonality':

Warhol is a baffling creature – mainly because his message is that he has no self to express. He names, rather than evaluates. His work is thus one long strategy of self-effacement, a disappearing act

behind the gaudy colours and aggressively banal subject matter. Hence the paradox of his enormous fame: he is “a personality” with no personality, transparent as air (Hughes, 1971).

The implication in Hughes’ review is that it was necessary for Warhol to maintain this aloof personality with no emotion or judgment because it not only complimented his art, but also defined it. When referring to *Campbell’s Soup Can* from 1965, Hughes states: ‘What remains is the flat, mute face of an actuality presented as meaning nothing beyond itself’. It is a description that could equally be applied to Warhol’s apparent persona. The analogy is an existential one, but from an almost nihilistic perspective – essentially asking how can a human being sustain such a sincere lack of empathy?

For Warhol ‘everyone is a star’ (Gidal, 1991, p.12), which conversely translates that no one is anymore a star than any one else. And yet, by most accounts, Warhol was a star. He may have come to some personal conclusion that in the greater scheme of things being celebrated is ultimately inconsequential, but about this we can only ever speculate. Nevertheless, his status, his lifestyle and his legacy were and are anything but mundane. The inconsistency therefore, offers its own curiosity. The paradox that is a ‘personality with no personality’ could fit into a materialist view that Warhol’s work means nothing because there is nothing for it to mean. What ultimately remains, is ink on a canvas arranged in such a way that creates a sense of representation – but a representation of the mundane, the everyday, the uninteresting. However, it is also the shared. In this sense it is a materialist perspective that ridicules any notion that art might somehow transcend the regular, or that it might in any way deserve the status of something sacred. And yet, in spite of all of this, the work – paradoxically – is esteemed and holds value in a marketplace and thereby shown to mean something to someone - even if that meaning is solely financial. If Warhol was aware of that, then his stated desire to be a machine might echo this contradiction. Being machine-like and having no opinion removes culpability and judgment, and thereby any offerings of emotional investment in the work – any of which would undermine the perfectly maintained paradox.

As a way of untangling this, Thomas Crow takes a different perspective with his paper *Saturday Disasters: Trace and Reference in Early Warhol* (Michelson, 2001, pp. 49-66). Rather than perceiving Warhol's persona and his work as intertwined, Crow separates his conception of Warhol into divided identities, inferring reasonably enough that the most prominent: the 'product of his famous pronouncements and of the allowed representations of his life and milieu' (Michelson, 2001, p.49) was only one face of this complicated character. Crow segregates this Warhol from the artist-practitioner who created the pictures hanging on the gallery walls, and who he defines as 'the complex of interests, sentiments, skills, ambitions, and passions actually figured in paint on canvas' (p.49). It is an essay that attempts to excavate an independent interpretation from Warhol's work that stands separately from the influence of his media-celebrated statements. Like Hughes, Crow questions whether Warhol's art 'fosters [a] critical or subversive apprehension of mass culture and the power of the image as commodity' and if so, does it 'succumb in an innocent but telling way to that numbing power, or [does it] exploit it cynically and meretriciously' (p.49). Unlike Hughes however, (who could be said to perceive Warhol as an unemotional cynic), Crow probes an idea that Warhol wasn't at all immune to the power of his imagery, suggesting that this perception of Warhol's non-compliance was allowed to happen because of 'a relative lack of concentration on the evidence'. Warhol's early pictures, he argues, have 'made a notoriously elusive figure more elusive than he needs to be – or better, only as elusive as he intended it to be' (Michelson, 2001, pp. 49,50).

Crow's first point of reference is the original source of Warhol's 'I want to be a machine' statement. This renowned 1963 interview with Gene Swenson was also where he uttered another famous line, 'I want everybody to think alike' (Harrison and Wood, 1992, pp. 730-733). For Crow, this interview substantiates his argument that these remarks by Warhol were 'less calculated' (Michelson, 2001, p.50) than he has been given credit for. These statements, which are so deeply entrenched in many art historians' and critics' perceptions of the elusive Warhol persona were, as Crow argues, originally intended for a different purpose. Crow reminds those critics and historians who fail to mention it, that

Warhol continues this interview by making explicit reference to the then Soviet Union, and argues that Warhol's provocation was aimed at subverting the ideological, capitalist, free-market policies, which were so keenly promoted by the American government during the Cold War conflict:

[Warhol's] more specific concern is rather the meanings normally given to the *difference* between the abundant material satisfactions of the capitalist West and the relative deprivation and limited personal choices of the Communist East. (Michelson, 2001, p.50)

Given that Warhol was of Czech decent, it is not such an outlandish idea that he would have an interest in the politics of the Cold War conflict. And as Crow indicates, this interview was recorded only 6 months after the Cuban Missile Crisis, and within a few months of President Kennedy's famous 'I am a Berliner' speech in West Berlin (p.50). So even if Warhol's interest was not such a personal one, the justification can be forgiven for assuming that this was a concern of global proportions. At that time of heightened tensions between East and West, it is hard to imagine that even Warhol would be unsusceptible to those political anxieties. In fact, Crow argues that Warhol was very keenly aware of American politics and actually extremely critical of the Kennedy administration's tactics of ideological warfare. Warhol's statements, he believes, were intended to pervert the promotion of the capitalist ideal that 'affluence equals freedom and individualism' (p.51). Where Warhol states 'I want everybody to think alike' Crow suggests that this provocation is in fact taking a swipe at the arrogance of the capitalist 'moral' high ground.

The spectacle of overwhelming Western affluence was the ideological weapon in which the Kennedy administration had made its greatest investment, and it is striking to find Warhol seizing on that image and negating its received political meaning in an effort to explain his work. Reading that interview now, one is further struck by the barely suppressed anger present throughout his responses. (Michelson, 2001, p.51)

Although Crow uses this interview to establish his theoretical position, he is quick to point out that such criticism of Warhol's work should optimally be based on the material exhibited on the wall and not what he discussed in interviews. Crow follows this point with an attempt to identify an emotional reading of Warhol's art based principally on his imagery, starting with the work that had made Warhol famous: his *Marilyn* series. Where Crow had been careful to isolate the ambiguity of Warhol's position over an image-as-commodity as the dominant conceptual curiosity for the majority of art critics (2001, p. 49) his focus on Warhol's imagery moves the debate towards the artist's other apparent fascination: death. And in making reference to the portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Crow also indicates a further oversight made by the critics and historians who doubt Warhol's emotional sensibilities. His argument is that Warhol started printing his images of Monroe within weeks of her death and 'that it is remarkable how consistently this simple fact goes unremarked in the literature' (2001, p.51). For Crow, this point justifies the suggestion that Monroe's death 'was clearly something with which Warhol had to deal, and that the pictures represent a lengthy act of mourning' (p.51). This leads him to ask, how is it that one 'handles the fact of celebrity death?' and 'how does one come to terms with the loss of a richly imagined presence that was never really there?' (p.51).

Peggy Phelan continues this search for emotional meaning in Warhol's work, in her text *Warhol: Performances of Death in America* (Jones and Stephenson, 1999, pp. 223-236), which can also be read as a response to Crow's essay. With reference to Warhol's screen-print *Suicide* (1962) from his *Death in America* series Phelan pursues a notion that meaning is reflected in technique. In creating the work, Warhol has taken a photographic image of a man falling from a building. Photographed from below, presumably ground level, the falling figure is silhouetted against a silver-grey sky background while the building he passes dominates the image plane. It too, is almost a silhouette; save a glint of reflected light catching the sides of some on-looking window-frames. Their contents however, are empty and black. But then in Warhol's printed version of this photograph, the image is scored.

A gleaming, white line stretches horizontally, from one side to another, across the face of the building and immediately below the falling figure. In Phelan's interpretation of the work, this horizontal mark reads as an interruption to 'the trajectory of the vertical line established by the motion of the leap' (Jones and Stephenson, 1999, p.226). It creates an illusion for her that suggests that 'the fall will actually be 'caught' by a net we cannot see, but can hallucinate because the horizontal line seems at once to underline and stop the fall' (p.226). Phelan argues that this horizontal line fundamentally informs the meaning of the work. Her reading of *Suicide* presents a case that Warhol was unable to wholly withdraw his emotions from the provocative nature of his imagery, and this line is the residual indication of those emotions.

In the light of Warhol's ambiguity on the matter, Phelan speculates that a factor behind some of Warhol's work was a perverse interest in its reception. She states that 'rather than making a direct transfer from his inner-emotional self to his work, Warhol attempted to transfer this transference from the work to the viewer' (Jones and Stephenson, 1999, p.224). In other words, Phelan is suggesting that Warhol was more interested in observing the viewer's projection onto the work (i.e. the concept that any sensation of shock or trauma is a result of the viewer's own, applied interpretation). But because Warhol had always remained emotionally cool and detached, Phelan cites an argument made by Bradford Collins that describes Warhol's work during the period he created *Suicide* as an attempt to 'commit [his own] emotional suicide' (Collins in Jones and Stevenson, 1999, p.224) – a description that would seem to echo Warhol's apparent emotional indifference to the *Death and Disasters* photographs. With regard to this mark however, Phelan suggests that making this *attempt* to commit emotional suicide does not necessarily mean that he succeeded:

In order to free the stage for the observer's reception, Warhol tried to renounce the trace of himself as maker. What he came to discover, however, was the impossibility of this renunciation, and he gradually learned to renounce this renunciation too. (Jones and Stephenson, 1999, p.224)

Suicide's horizontal white mark thereby, embodies this 'renunciation of the renunciation'. It is a position that reflects Hal Foster's definition of a 'Pop' – the 'slipping and streaking, blanching and blanking, repeating and colouring of the images' including moments 'such as slipping of the register of the image and the washing of the whole in colour' (Michelson, 2001, p. 73). Similar to Phelan, Foster too, argues for an empathetic reading in Warhol's work and perceives these marks as an emotional encounter between Warhol and his imagery. In his essay, *Death in America*, Foster describes the encounter as 'traumatic realism' (something that can be loosely surmised as another description for the tension between image and medium). In this case, it is a paradox between two conflicting emotional intents. On one hand, Foster interprets the work as a personal attempt by Warhol to distance himself from the trauma of his imagery, while on the other hand he indicates just as strong a desire in Warhol to 'encounter' it.

Foster's conceptualizes this desire as an attempt to experience an encounter with the *real* – the 'real' in this case referring to the emotions such an event depicted in the photographs should *really* provoke. It is also a position that Foster uses to revisit the argument that Warhol's repeated imagery invokes the dulling of any such shock. Rather than reading Warhol's repetition as a critique of society, passively accepting their desensitization, Foster interprets the repeated image as an act that is far less judgmental. Instead, he sees it as Warhol's personal attempt to 'screen' against this 'real' (Michelson, 2001, p.72). For Foster, the repetition transpires as an active (almost therapeutic) device through which Warhol himself becomes less affected by the traumatic imagery. On the occasions when a 'Pop' occurs however, Foster argues that this is when the 'real ruptures the screen of repetition' (Michelson, 2001, p.73). The salvation provided by repeating the image is broken when the materiality of the medium (i.e. when an area of dried ink or photographic emulsion literally blocks the screen used for printing the image) forcibly reminds the artist and the viewer of the trauma. 'It is a rupture between perception and consciousness' (p.73) Foster argues, before making reference to *Ambulance Disaster* (1963) – a work which presents a once repeated image of a deceased woman's body spilling out from

the broken window of smashed ambulance. With reference to a smudge that appears in the second image and effaces the woman's head, Foster suggests that in finding it necessary to 'screen' it, the trauma of the imagery is stressed even more:

It is the first order of shock that the repetition of the image serves to screen, even if in doing so the repetition produces a second order of trauma, here at the level of technique where the [Pop] breaks through the screen and allows the real to poke through. The tear in *Ambulance Disaster* (1963) is such a hole for me, though what loss is figured there I cannot say. Through these pokes or pops we almost seem to touch the real, which the repetition of the image at once distances and rushes towards us (Michelson, 2001, p. 75).

It is in this sense that Phelan's suggestion that Warhol set about 'renouncing his renunciation', also identifies a conflict in Warhol's attempt to distance himself from the trauma and his will or his urge to empathize with the represented image. But where Foster reads these marks as an attempt to 'encounter the real', Phelan perceives Warhol's action as a form of resignation to the inability to remain unemotional – her description of Warhol 'renouncing' his original 'renunciation' being another way of saying that he would embrace his empathy, having been unable to sustain his 'emotional suicide':

This white horizontal line prohibits the possibility of viewing *Suicide* as a transparent documentary. The line accents the impossibility of Warhol's renunciation of artistic presence, which is to say of life. (Jones and Stephenson, 1999, p.226)

Having already perceived the white mark as a type of hallucinatory net intended to catch the fall, Phelan continues her search for meaning in the work, beyond the materiality of the medium, and onto the process of screen-printing as well, stating that: 'to silk-screen, massage, or treat an image that records death is also necessarily to insist on the image's afterlife' (Jones and Stephenson, 1999, p.226) – this process of 'massaging' the image, representing to her, an attempt to 'stage an encounter between the living and the dead' (p.224).

In reality, the line is probably an accidental mark that was most likely created through the enlargement process that would have been used when the original photograph was transferred onto the light-sensitive film, and then attached to the screen ready for printing. It was not unusual for marks like these to occur during such early experiments in photographic screen-printing, and unless extreme care was taken during the actual printing process, patches of ink would often dry and as a consequence, block the passage of any new ink to the paper or the canvas. When this happened, high-contrast scores, such as this horizontal white mark, would appear through an image. In technical terms this was a distinct printmaking error and normally such a print would have been discarded. Warhol however, was evidently encouraged by this happenchance effect or else he wouldn't have embraced it so often in his practice – especially in his *Death and Disasters* series. Nevertheless, as previously stated, his opinion on the matter remained a matter for conjecture.

Warhol's reluctance to divulge any meaning behind his work emphasizes the sense that these marks are the result of a material process and are not necessarily a part of the representational image. Through my own experience of screen-printing, I am familiar with the practical processes used by Warhol in screen-printing these works, (and although it is quite apparent that Warhol was seduced by these blips, blotches, scratches and gaps in his imagery) I am inclined to argue that these marks, thrown up by his experiments, were in fact the result of happenchance. As explained above, marks like the horizontal white line in *Suicide* are often an unpredictable occurrence within the screen-printing process. It is quite difficult to plan their exact appearance, let alone their placement in relation to the image.

As I have also discussed with reference to my own practice, in particular the occurrence of the glitch in *Chamber*, these marks in Warhol's prints serve as a reminder of the material processes involved in creating the image, and because of this, could also be said to adhere to the concepts of structural-materialist filmmaking. With regard to the sense of tension in the works, as viewers we are again subject to the psychological processes of projection and identification. The recognition that these effects are happenchance prompts a conscious

acknowledgement of these processes, which occur unconsciously in our everyday existence. As with the glitch in *Chamber* these marks do not necessarily mean anything (and even though they are subsequently retained within the work) the fact that they occur on the face of the victim of an ambulance-crash, as her upended body hangs through a smashed passenger-window, or that a white line slices through the image and into the trajectory of a falling figure, is purely coincidental. But the unconscious perception of meaning nonetheless, is what can make the works engaging: indeed if there is not an unconscious perception before we examine our reaction we are unlikely to be intrigued.

These texts by Hal Foster and Peggy Phelan demonstrate how this tension exists for the viewer and informs the image. Phelan's description of a net that will catch the suicide victim's fall, is an example of this process of projecting one's own meaning onto the materiality of an artwork that Warhol offered no opinion on. But it is also her apparent necessity to do so that makes her text significant. In answer to the question, 'does the indifference that Warhol displayed as a person become a factor in the interpretation of his work?' – what we find in both of these texts by Phelan and Foster, are attempts to empathize with Warhol as well as the image. In particular, they are attempts to empathize with Warhol's supposed indifference towards the nature of his images. In pursuing Bradford Collins' description of Warhol 'committing emotional suicide' for example, Phelan writes of Warhol's 'best work' inviting the viewer to imagine themselves as 'simultaneously dead and alive' (Jones and Stephenson, 1999, p.224). As it transpires however, Phelan's projection of meaning onto the horizontal white mark in *Suicide*, demonstrates a refusal on her part, to accept the notion that Warhol's indifference might be genuine response. Instead of being able to imagine herself as 'dead', Phelan responds emotionally to the white mark, and as already discussed, attributes its existence to Warhol's inability to 'commit emotional suicide'. The analysis of this is that it is not Warhol who is unable to commit emotional suicide, but Phelan. Her description of Warhol 'renouncing his renunciation' (p.224) can actually be understood to reveal her own refusal to renounce an emotional response to the image.

The point of highlighting this, is that Phelan's projection of her own response onto Warhol, is consistent with the way a viewer will project meaning onto the materiality of an artwork. As with Malcolm Le Grice's description of *Horror Film 1* (Le Grice, 2008) – despite having an objective perspective of everything involved in the construction of an image – a moment occurs when something 'magical' happens. It is in this moment that we perceive our own desires for meaning despite the available evidence that indicates there is no meaning. Phelan's projection onto Warhol demonstrates this tension, as well as own difficulty as human beings to maintain a consistent sense of objectivity. As Peter Gidal contends, it is the *continual* attempt to destroy the illusion, which is necessary for a (structural-materialist) artwork to succeed.

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A TENSION BETWEEN MATERIAL AND IDENTIFICATION IN VIDEO

David Hall's *This is a Video Monitor (1973)/This is a Television Receiver (1976)*
and David Critchley's *Static Acceleration (1976)*

In 1979, an exhibition of artists' film took place at the Hayward Gallery, Southbank, London. The title of the exhibition was 'Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film 1910-1975'. The Exhibition Officers for the show, David Curtis and Richard Francis, wrote a 'forward' for the exhibition catalogue, in which they described the exploration of materiality in film as the fundamental concept of the exhibition:

Artist filmmakers are not manufacturers of the escapist dreams of conventional cinema; indeed they have almost wholly rejected narrative and concentrated on film's formal qualities. They have looked closely at the material of film, its physical and visual characteristics as painters and sculptors have at the formal nature of their activities. 'Film as Film' should perhaps be 'Film about Film'; this concentration on the medium has created 'filmmakers' and 'film' rather than 'film directors' and institutional 'cinema' (Curtis & Francis, 1979, p.4).

Similarly in 1975, 'The Video Show', an exhibition of artists' video, took place at the Serpentine Gallery, London, where an underlying thesis of the exhibition was to celebrate the distinctive nature of video as art – an independent artistic concept based on a (then) new¹⁶ medium with its own aesthetic, material and conceptual 'qualities'. As a particularly articulate artist when it came to celebrating the emergence of video art and a co-organizer of the exhibition, David Hall wrote in anticipation of The Video Show that:

It would be reasonable to argue that much video tape recording is done as a facsimile of film. This is understandable when one

¹⁶ Although the origins of video can be attributed to John Logie Baird's creation the first television picture in 1925, since its increased development in the 1950s, video recording technology had gradually become available for commercial and independent use during the late 1960s and early 1970s – signaling for some artists, the arrival of a new cinematic medium.

considers the historical pressures on such a comparatively new medium, much in the same way as film suffered in its turn from the classic theatrical influence. But the argument of substitution is only relevant when the procedure is conducted as though it were film (Hall, 1975, p.20).

Just as artist-filmmakers were concerned with distancing their practice from the traditions of narrative filmmaking, video artists were keen to establish their practice as something even more removed. With this article, Hall strives to underline the theory that video should be read as a medium that is distinct from its cinematic counterpart, even for 'those unacquainted with the distinctions between film and video' and for whom 'it might appear that the difference is no more than a choice of presentation' (p.20). His text continues in this vein, and methodically lists a number of material variations that denote video's autonomy from film. An immediately apparent example is in the differing systems of presentation (which at the time was mainly pre-video-projection¹⁷). He notes the differences between film's (often) necessary requirement to be projected in a darkened space, where 'the screen is large and consuming, and the audience are encapsulated in the darkness, immersed in the isolated spectacle' and video's novel presentation on 'a picture box' (p.21) – this 'picture box' being the video monitor: a three dimensional, physical object that appeared to contain the moving image behind a glass screen, but also, and quite importantly, was a technology that would allow moving image to be viewed in a lit room (or white gallery space): a distinction, which could add a further scope to any sculptural aspirations for moving image art. Of the artists interested in the more material-centric readings of the monitor's physical properties, famous examples include Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974) a video installation where a model Buddha appears to be viewing his own image on the screen of a video monitor; or his *Family of Robot* works (circa 1986), where Paik assembled various video monitors/TV sets and radios into humanoid-style figures.

¹⁷ Although at the time crude technology for video projection did exist, and even though some artists actually had the opportunity to use it, including Tamara Krikorian – who in fact used a prototype in *The Video Show* – it was not until many years later, circa the late 1980s and early 1990s that video projection become more accessible as a (material) option in the exhibition of video art.

Although exhibited in darkened gallery spaces, an example in this regard by Hall himself, is in his *Situation Envisaged* series (1978, 1980, 1988/90). For these works, Hall arranged a number of video monitors into stacks or circular structures, but strategically, he turned their screens away from the inquisitive eyes of the viewer. In doing so, Hall's work emphasizes the physicality of the video monitor and uses its presence as a three dimensional box to form an obstacle that prevents its own screen from being viewed. For viewers of the first *Situation Envisaged* work (*The Situation Envisaged*, 1978), Hall impedes the audience's ability to view the screens by turning the monitors towards the walls of the gallery space. Only the glowing lights emitted from behind the monitor's glass screen remain visible as an ephemeral trace of the video image's presence. The result is an array of alternating colours that flicker outwards onto the hidden walls and in the process, draw attention to the creative use of the video monitor's light emitting specificity – something which differs considerably from the reflected light that is a circumstance of illuminating a white screen in film projection.

In this way, Hall's *Situation Envisaged* series can be seen to pose a challenge to those audiences who may have only differentiated video from film as simply 'a choice of presentation' (Hall, 1975, p.20), and encourages them to contemplate the monitor as a physical sculptural object, distinct from its primary function as an electronic device for displaying images and sound. And it is for reasons like this, that Hall's work serves as an example of the type of video artwork that emerged during the 1970s with the underlying conceptual agenda of celebrating video's independence as a new form of cinema. It was the emphasis on the medium's unique specificities, like Hall's exploration of the monitor's glow, that to its acceptance as a medium suitable for more conceptual forms of art, which like structural-materialist filmmaking, could be distinguished from its associations with representational or narrative based art. As Sean Cubitt reflects:

Video practice offers important challenges to [cinema] theory. Like culture as an object of study, video demands a holistic approach, investigating all the determinations focused upon and opportunities latent within a given situation. Like culture, video requires an historical understanding in order to clarify its present functioning (1993, p. xvii).

It is in light of this form of practice, that a number of recently published texts have reviewed the histories of moving image art, with an emphasis on how video technology has influenced the production of art (among them: Rees, 1999; Elwes, 2005; Hatfield, 2006; Meigh-Andrews, 2006; Curtis, 2007). Varying distinctions that range from the aesthetic of video's colour spectrum (or its original greyscale) to its capacity to rewind and replay; or from its instant feedback system (whereby a camera is set to relay a continual signal to an outputting monitor – vis-à-vis CCTV), to even its conceptualization as an electronic signal, have all come to characterize the materiality of video that has encouraged its use as an artistic medium. Alongside the technology's more cultural associations as an extension of television, as well as its ease of use in performance art (enabled principally by the intimacy of the live performer-to-camera-to-monitor set-up) these characteristics and conceptual usages have all come to form what might be considered a 'vocabulary' within the language of video art.

Around the time of the Serpentine Video Show, David Hall was promoting many of these characteristics in a bid to gain recognition for the practice as a serious art form – worthy of the attentions of the national art institutions and broadcast television companies (Hall, 1975). After listing the unique qualities of video production in his 1975 text on The Video Show, Hall later set about defining the criteria for 'Video as Art' – something he would distinguish from a notion of 'Artists' Video'. The basis of this concept, again drawing on the distinctions between an artwork created *using* a medium (simply for the purposes of recording an image, for example) and an artwork that is created with the specific intention of interrogating or exploring the medium itself:

It can be summarized then that Video Art is video *as* the artwork – the parameters deriving from the characteristics of the medium itself, rather than artwork *using* video – which adopts a device for an already defined content. By characteristics I have meant those particular attributes specific to both its technology and the reading of it as a phenomenon (Hall, 1978).

Before working with video, Hall's early practice was sculptural and installation based; and in 1966, he exhibited along side artists like Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Sol Le Witt and Carl Andre in the 'Primary Structures' show at the Jewish Museum in New York – an exhibition widely recognized as the first major showcase of Minimalist Art (Hopkins, 2000, p138). This sculptural and conceptual background would be a major influence on his practice in video, especially when it came to perhaps his most famous work, *Television Interruptions* (1971) – a work in which, Hall broadcast ten short clips, each of approximately three and a half minutes in length, unannounced and un-credited on national television. And it was with this work, (which included images of a burning television set and a running tap) that Hall would realize his conceptualization of the actual electronic signal as the most fundamental form of materiality in video art (Hall, 2004).

The legacy of the Primary Structures exhibition can also be perceived in some of Hall's later video installations – in particular *101 TV Sets* (1975), an installation that Hall made in collaboration with Tony Sinden, and exhibited at the Video Show in 1975. In this work, literally 101 television sets were stacked and arranged side-by-side along the walls of the gallery space. For a viewer experiencing the work, all four walls of the exhibition space would be crowded with television sets, from floor to ceiling, each of them blaring out a variety of visual and aural activity. One could for example relate this installation to the sculptural work of Donald Judd, except instead of experiencing the juxtaposition of different materials integral to Judd's practice, it is the different shapes, sizes and image qualities of television set; along with the mixture of varying identifiable images broadcast over the different channels, that integrate to form one 'whole' visual and aural form. For the viewer, patterns become perceptible

between the different channels, while numerous sets, 'mis-tuned' so that they simply display the 'snow' of white noise, create tonal effects that drift in and out of perception, along with the cacophony of sounds, punctured by the occasional rhythm and harmony.

As with works discussed so far in this thesis, the viewer can perceive a tension in the recognizable cinematic form becoming a material object. However, the main reason I want to address the work of David Hall in this thesis, is because of two artworks in particular: *This is a Video Monitor* (1973) and *This is a Television Receiver* (1976). This is because, these two works, perhaps above any other, have most inspired my recent practice and this research in general.

Superficially, *This is a Video Monitor* and *This is a Television Receiver* appear to be very similar, with *This is a Television Receiver* retracing a familiar formula of production to its predecessor made three years earlier. Both works initiate with an image a person looking directly into camera in close-up shots of their head and shoulders. Conversely, the images might also be read as the head and shoulders of a person looking directly towards the audience. Initially, this is the ambiguous conflict that Hall seeks to address. It is an indication towards a perceptual difference that occurs between the phenomenological recognition of a person who appears to be addressing a viewer directly, and the cognitive understanding that this occurrence is the actual result of a carefully orchestrated system – a system, to which television as a medium is in fact, very adaptable. While *This is a Video Monitor* takes the form of a woman speaking directly to the viewer, *This is a Television Receiver* echoes this image but manifest in the form of the BBC newsreader, Richard Baker. Similarly, Baker is addressing the viewer, but with this piece, his delivery comes from an authoritative position upheld by the cultural conventions of television. Over their duration, both works deliver an almost identical monologue. The resolution of which, serves to deconstruct the system that fabricates the illusion that this person is firstly, speaking directly to the viewer and secondly, that it is in fact a person at all. 'This is a Video Monitor' she says. 'This is a Television Receiver' he says.

‘Which is a box. The shell is of wood, metal or plastic. On one side, most likely the one you are looking at, there is a large rectangular opening. This opening is filled with a curved glass surface, which is emitting light. The light, passing through the curved glass surface, fades in intensity over that surface from dark to light and in a variety of shades of grey [colours]. These form shapes, which often appear as images. In this case the image of a woman [man]. But it is not a woman [man].’

The implication in each monologue is towards the physical apparatus that *materially* combine to form the image. The monologue informs the viewer that what they are looking at is not a person, but the image of a person composed from a series of electronic signals and glowing pixels. After each monologue indicates that the sound heard is not in fact a voice, the second phase of both works is a distortion of the image. At the end of each ‘apparent’ monologue Hall rewinds and replays and re-records the image. As the monologues are repeated a second time, the signal is significantly deteriorated. Again the process is repeated as the image is rewound and replayed and rerecorded with the deterioration increasing incrementally. Gradually the images become less like those of a man or a woman and come to resemble a series of tonal blobs and muffled, crackling sounds. It is a process that with *This is a Video Monitor* primarily reveals the nature of video as an electronic system of recording and representation. But it is also a process that reveals the malleable, material nature of video’s electronic signal in a sculptural form. In the way that the monologue’s reference to the physical properties of the monitor indicate video’s potential as a sculptural object (one that is defined by its apparatus), Hall’s manipulation of the deterioration of the medium indicates the materiality of the signal. The revelation is the same with *This is a Television Receiver*, but in a way that also allows a further implication: that of the physical manipulation, and sculptural potential of *television* as a signal.

The nucleus of this PhD research began for me while I was considering the tension between what it was that I wanted to perceive, and what it was that I was *actually* perceiving. Although I would now argue that the tension exists as a

result of an attempt to identify with the portrayed figures, at the time of beginning this research, there appeared, to me, to be something about the way the deterioration of the video signal seemed sympathetic to the circumstances of the portrayed figures. It was only later, with the benefit of this practice-informed research that I realized that this was to do with my own projection of meaning onto the materiality of the medium that I began to realize what it was about these works that intrigued me.

It was an idea that was in some way informed by another work, *Static Acceleration* (1976) by David Critchley. In this work, a close-up shot is taken of the artist's head and shoulders, as he stares directly into camera. With the intermittent sound of a high-pitched, electronic tone, Critchley (as the performer within the work) begins to turn his head from one side to another, incrementally increasing his speed as the chimes begin to sound more and more frequently. As the work progresses, Critchley's head turns faster and faster until he suddenly reaches a point of such violent head-slamming that he can no longer withstand the physical exertion and has to stop. At which point, there is an abrupt pause, and Critchley returns to his original pose of staring directly into camera. There is then a slight jolt in the image as the tape cuts, before the performance is repeated. Except this time, the performance is replayed and re-recorded at its slowest possible speed. We suddenly become much more aware of the materiality of the recording medium as Critchley's features become notably more distorted by the idiosyncratic marks of analogue video. The video image is immediately stretched and twisted as one video field slowly scrolls into another while increasingly, the identifiable image that was Critchley's face, becomes more and more blurred, as the faster his original movement was, the more violently twisted his features now become.

Critchley's practice has always had a strong performance base and his early work often involved pushing his body to certain extremes and usually to their inevitable outcomes – eating until he was sick, drinking until he was drunk or in slightly more violent situations impaling himself with various objects (Hatfield, 2006, p. 107). Although he initially considered himself to be a performance artist, Critchley's work was often cross-platform and his performances would

regularly include film projections or slide displays. It was in 1973 however, when he first started working with video, that Critchley's considerations can be said to grow beyond these investigations into the performative possibilities of his own body, and begin to develop towards exploring the actual limits of the recording technology involved in the creation of his work. This can be seen as a pivotal moment in the evolution of Critchley's practice because it not only opens his work up to an entirely different notion of physicality, but it also leads to a novel conception of who and what the audience is being asked to identify with. Thus, with *Static Acceleration*, Critchley is exploring an act of extremes. The physical exertions in this work do not solely test the limits of his own physical capability to wrench his head from side to side. The work is also a testimony to the material thresholds inherent in the video technology's capacity to effectively capture the rapid movement. Conceptually, what Critchley does with this work, is invite his audience to refrain from simply reading the image as a documentation of his performance, and instead contemplate the work as a very specific act in video recording. It is with this in mind that we might view *Static Acceleration* as not just a performance *to* video, but as a performance created *by* video. When discussing his work, Critchley states:

It is about negotiating between performance and the performer and the medium. It is not just a recording of a performance being shown, it is actually worked into the medium. It is not just a method of presentation. The performance is actually the piece. The medium is actually the work (Critchley, 2007).

In relating this distinction to the ideas of tension, one might question how it is maintained. How does a work like this extend beyond a simplistic analysis of what the medium can do, for example? Or in terms of 'content', how does it differ from Peter Gidal's warning of merely substituting one hierarchy for another? (Gidal, 1976) The answers to both these questions relate to the performance. The image of a man violently throwing his head from side to side until he is forced to stop himself is not only a form of narrative that is linear, but also one that a viewer can identify with. But when the work is re-recorded and replayed at its slowest possible speed, any sense of that identification is

immediately interrupted. This way, *Static Acceleration* can be seen to reflect Critchley's earlier performative works where the attempt to form a sense of identification with Critchley as a 'person' is interrupted. By pushing his body to the very limits of its physical faculty, Critchley subverts the perception of himself as a person with a history and an identity, and instead, encourages a more objective reading of his body as a material object – one that is only capable of consuming a certain amount of food or alcohol until it begins to react. It is in this sense that *Static Acceleration* mirrors this confusion of identification. As the image becomes more distorted and begins to become more of a work that stresses the specificities of the medium, *Static Acceleration* provokes a question as to when the viewer will begin to loosen their attachment to the narrative of someone violently throwing his head from side to side, and at what point does it become possible to view the image solely as a form of video aesthetic? This sense of tension in identification comes with the pending question (particularly with a violent image like this): is it ever possible to lose that attachment?

But because *Static Acceleration* is made as video art, rather than a live performance, it adds an additional layer of complexity to the work. As Critchley states, 'It is not just the recording of a performance being shown, it is actually worked into the medium... The medium is actually the work' (Critchley, 2007). In emphasizing the material presence of video, Critchley is asking the viewer not to examine his own performance, but to contemplate the recording. More specifically, he is asking the viewer to read this recording *as* the performance. The performative element of *Static Acceleration* is not simply Critchley violently shaking his head – it is the performance of the video technology and its 'attempt' to capture as much of the fast moving information as possible. The limits of which are revealed by the distorted imagery. The complexity in this shift of focus, is that it also a shift in identification. Critchley's invitation to the viewer is to transpose their empathy from his performance to that of the video medium. In doing so, he presents the ultimate tension in the work: the placement of identification with an insentient object.

From one perspective, *Static Acceleration* is an invitation for the viewer to empathize with the extremity of Critchley's performance. But then, by total

contrast (and also through the very process of that performance) it rejects this identification, and reveals Critchley's presence as a material object: the video image. The paradox however, is that despite taking this detached, materialist view to Critchley's video image, the work reveals that the subject of the viewer's identification – is not Critchley, but the video medium. With this revelation, *Static Acceleration* goes from being a work that denies identification with Critchley because he is a material object (a video image), to paradoxically, personifying a different material object: the video medium. This is the tension in the work. It is a constant shifting in the viewer's placement of identification between the performer, the image and the material.

With *This is a Video Monitor* and *This is a Television Receiver*, the meaning that I was projecting onto the work (via the materiality) was a notion that the deterioration in the works also represented some kind of performance on behalf of the video medium. It was a notion that is informed by a sense of empathy for the circumstances of analogue video as an artistic medium and also for the apparent legacy of David Hall's concept that 'video art is video as the artwork'.

The final chapter in this thesis, *Decay Behind a Glass Monitor*, is a paper that I first drafted in 2008. In this paper I argue that the deterioration in *This is a Video Monitor* and *This is a Television Receiver*, is prophetic of the gradual demise in influence of David Hall's concept over moving image art, and also the demise of analogue video as an artistic medium in the face of digital technologies. I have included it in this thesis, because it embodies, for me, a significant moment in this research when I became aware of my own process of projection onto the materiality of a moving image artwork.

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As previously stated, the nucleus of this PhD research began for me while I was considering the tension between what it was that I wanted to perceive, and what it was that I was actually perceiving in David Hall's *This is Video Monitor* and *This is a Television Receiver*. This text, first draft in 2008, argues that the deterioration in these works, is prophetic of the gradual demise in influence of the idea that 'video art is video as the artwork' (Hall, 1978), and also the demise of analogue video as a medium for artistic use in the face of digital technologies. I have included it in this thesis because it represents a significant moment of development in this research, in particular when I became aware of my own process of projection onto the materiality of a moving image artwork. (Please note that there are some repetitions in the descriptions of artworks that I have already referred to in this thesis).

DECAY BEHIND A GLASS MONITOR

When taking a retrospective view of British Video Art of the 1970s and 1980s, it is difficult to deny the strong emphasis the concept of medium specificity played on the practitioners of the time. And yet, when a new generation of artists made their impact on a much wider scene in the 1990s, the grip the concept had held over the use of moving image technology, seemed to have considerably loosened. If the increase in the accessibility of moving image was signified by the plethora of projections that emerged in darkened gallery spaces during the 1990s, it would seem to be an increase grown from associations with the more familiar recording and representational languages of the conventional cinematic narrative and documentary, than the (admittedly dogmatic) self-referential studies in medium specificity. But these are languages that lend themselves to a tradition where the captured image takes precedence over the process by which that image was recorded and *represented*. Comments such as Sean Cubitt's reference to 'the banal repetition of the unexamined foursquare screen' (2007, p.416) has led to the general perception that this complex element in the history of video art seems to have been of little relevance to a later generation of artists and audiences alike. The conceptual practice that had previously questioned

such phenomena as the actual materiality of a moving image still remains largely ignored by a majority of curatorial and critical circles long accustomed with a variety of moving image technology. Yet with the benefit of history, it is clear to see that media specificity aided a number of important developments in moving image theory and practice. Where issues of experimental filmmaking looked to readdress notions of photographic moving image media as mere tools in a process of unmediated representation, the emergence of video technology proved to be an important contributing factor in the confirmation of this cause. The appearance of a new technology that became very rapidly accepted as an industry standard (whilst simultaneously gathering ground as a community based and domestic feature) provoked numerous questions for a number of artists interested in moving image media. It was a line of questioning that not only sought to explore the phenomenal cultural and political impact of video, but also to pose its emergence as a platform for a fundamentally unique and truly original artistic discipline. By following definitions such as David Hall's 'Using Video and Video Art' (Hall, 1978), artists engaging with video in the 1970s helped refine an expectation that the practice of 'video art' remained true to a language of the video medium itself, rather than, as Hall puts it, 'artists using video', which he dismissively defines as 'Artists' Video'. In approaches that ranged from the highly conceptual to the wholly formal, media specific practice enabled artists to define an entirely new language for video art through endeavors that highlighted video's distinction from other moving image media in a way that ultimately confirmed video art's independent signature as an altogether new art form.

Amid these detailed explorations of video's unique inflections and idiosyncrasies, between its capabilities and limitations, was a burgeoning approach to the medium that recognized its material and structural manner. It led to a concentrated area of interest within the practice as installation, where the specificity of video's physical and potentially sculptural components, from its apparatus to its signal, were as integral to the language as the represented image. The most apparent of which were the sculptural possibilities of the distinctly physical monitor. The very fact that the practice could now be

exhibited in a white gallery space, rather than projected overhead within a darkened room, focused attention on the dominating presence of this three-dimensional object that defined most video viewing at the time. For audiences already grappling with the material properties of film and its projection, a structural transition occurred with the ethereality of the image located somewhere behind a glass screen. Even the cinematic glow would have a very different sense of physical presence, as the light being thrown by a projector and reflected back from a screen was transferred to being emitted from within the monitor itself.

Not surprisingly then, the monitor could be largely identified as an integral vernacular in the language of early video art, and it was thus that artists would seek to undermine and readdress the role it played in the accustomed viewing habits of their audience. This led to a number of experimentations being posed regarding its physical properties as distinctive materiality within the video-art-object relationship. An example of this is in David Hall's *The Situation Envisaged* series. By turning a number of stacked monitors towards the walls of a gallery, and presenting the viewer with a range of great, black monoliths, Hall utilizes the monitor's light emitting specificity to flicker an array of colours outwards onto the hidden walls. Limited in their ability to view the screens, the viewer is subjected to the unfamiliar perspective of the monitor as an aesthetic object in its own right. Equally, some works were created in a way, which deliberately exposed an imagistic quality or effect particular to a specific model or type of monitor technology. Tamara Krikorian's *Breeze* (1975) is one such example, where the technology used in its display is as fundamental to the imagery as it is to the over-all concept. *Breeze* recognizes the imagistic quality of an image of water mediated and abstracted by the video technology of the mid-1970s. It is an image that highlights a raw beauty to an otherwise dull, monochrome aesthetic, amplifying a distinctive specificity in both the video recording and in its exhibition. As if responsively, the light emitting quality of the monitors used in the 4-channel installation, intensifies the ethereal nature of the image. Another work is Stephen Partridge's aptly titled *Monitor* (1975) where a very particular model of Sony monitor displays a recorded image of itself. But within

the screen of this depicted self-image, another monitor is repeated. It follows that screens within screens repeat the self-image in a seemingly endless fashion that plays with an illusion of depth mirrored by the three-dimensions of the actual monitor on which the work is displayed. The repeated image reflects the resulting feedback that occurs when a camera is pointed directly at its outputting monitor, but this however is not how the work was constructed. As a performer within the work, Partridge's forearms enter the frame of each screen to gently pivot and revolve the displayed monitor; with a slight but deliberate, time delay between each rotation revealing the pre-recorded nature of the work's structure. Nevertheless, the resulting illusionary cone that the idiosyncratic technique reflects stretches far and beyond the depicted horizon line, creating a sensation that should defy the boundaries of the monitor's physical casing. With works like this in mind, one can begin to imagine how, before the more contemporary advent of video projection, the cinematic expectations associated with film did not necessarily form the most obvious language in which to engage with video. Media specific artworks, such as these early British examples, served to establish the unique attributes of video in a way that identified them as components of a conceptually rich artistic medium – independent from its associations with other recording and representational media. Among the most widely known pieces from this period are perhaps David Hall's *This is a Video Monitor* (1973) and *This is a Television Receiver* (1976). As works with their own distinctively 'material' qualities, they provide an interesting point to reflect on Hall's unique approach to the sculptural properties of video.

Superficially these works appear to be very similar, with *This is a Television Receiver* retracing a familiar formula of production to its predecessor made three years earlier. Both works initiate with an image a person looking directly into camera in close-up shots of their head and shoulders. Conversely, the images might also be read as the head and shoulders of a person looking directly towards the audience. Initially, this is the ambiguous conflict that Hall seeks to address. It is an indication towards a perceptual difference that occurs between the phenomenological recognition of a person who appears to be addressing a viewer directly, and the cognitive understanding that this occurrence is the

actual result of a carefully orchestrated system – a system, to which television as a medium is in fact, very adaptable. While *This is a Video Monitor* takes the form of a woman speaking directly to the viewer, *This is a Television Receiver* echoes this image but manifest in the form of the newsreader, Richard Baker. Similarly, Baker is addressing the viewer, but with this piece, his delivery comes from an authoritative position upheld by the cultural conventions of television. Over their duration, both works deliver a very similar monologue. The resolution of which, serves to deconstruct the system that fabricates the illusion that this person is firstly, speaking directly to the viewer and secondly, that it is in fact a person at all. ‘This is a Video Monitor’ she says. ‘This is a Television Receiver’ he says.

‘Which is a box. The shell is of wood, metal or plastic. On one side, most likely the one you are looking at, there is a large rectangular opening. This opening is filled with a curved glass surface, which is emitting light. The light, passing through the curved glass surface, fades in intensity over that surface from dark to light and in a variety of shades of grey [colours]. These form shapes, which often appear as images. In this case the image of a woman [man]. But it is not a woman [man].’

The implication in each monologue is towards the physical apparatus that *materially* combine to form the image. The monologue informs the viewer that what they are looking at is not a person, but the image of a person composed from a series of electronic signals and glowing pixels. After each monologue indicates that the sound heard is not in fact a voice, the second phase of both works is a distortion of the image. At the end of each ‘apparent’ monologue Hall rewinds and replays and re-records the image. As the monologues are repeated a second time, the signal is significantly deteriorated. Again the process is repeated as the image is rewound and replayed and rerecorded with the deterioration increasing incrementally. Gradually the images become less like those of a man or a woman and come to resemble a series of tonal blobs and muffled, crackling sounds. It is a process that with *This is a Video Monitor* primarily reveals the nature of video as an electronic system of recording and

representation. But it is also a process that reveals the malleable, material nature of video's electronic signal in a sculptural form. In the way that the monologue's reference to the physical properties of the monitor indicate video's potential as a sculptural object (one that is defined by its apparatus), Hall's manipulation of the deterioration of the medium indicates the materiality of the signal. The revelation is the same with *This is a Television Receiver*, but in a way that also allows a further implication: that of the physical manipulation, and sculptural potential of *television* as a signal.

With a number of media-specific video artists maintaining that the associations between video and television were far from slight, works like David Hall's *Television Interruptions* extended these comparisons from conceptual to actual. His 'interruptions', broadcast on Scottish Television during the 1971 Edinburgh Festival were a series of unannounced and un-credited instances within the actual framework of television. Over the course of several days, normal broadcast television was 'interrupted' at random, by a series of unscheduled bursts of Hall's work, ranging from burning television sets to famously, a running tap. This 'Tap Piece' in particular, is very revealing of Hall's sculptural approach because it more explicitly emphasizes the viewer's television set as the object by which the image was displayed. In a moment where Scottish Television suddenly became a grey-ish, white blank, a tap appeared to be lowered into the top, right-hand corner of the screen. At this point, unseen hands turn the tap on and allow water to stream forth. As a meniscus line gradually rises up from the bottom of the screen, in a way that momentarily transforms it into some kind of goldfish bowl-like container, an illusion is created of the viewer's television set flooding. But for *Television Interruptions* as a whole, there was in fact a more physical metamorphosis taking place. Curiously, Hall's *Interruptions* were actually shot and edited on 16mm film due to union rules and engineering standards regulating broadcast quality at the time. Despite this however, Hall maintains the view that these works actually constitute video art. More precisely, he maintains the position that they actually constitute media specific video art (Hall, 2004). Hall's reasoning for this is founded on the precise point at which they were transmitted and their physical 'state' was mediated as a video

signal. For Hall, this was in fact the point at which *Television Interruptions* became an artwork. As a 'happening', it was absolutely necessary that television was indeed interrupted, and so principally, it was only at this point when these works were broadcast as an analogue signal, that they came into conceptual and actual fruition. But with this in mind, if one takes a sculptural perspective, and considers the idea that it was in fact only at this point when they were physically mediated at television's most essential as an analogue, video signal that they truly existed as an artwork; it does raise an important question as to whether the integrity of media specific video art is fundamentally dependent on its specificity at this actual, material level. In which case, these works face a certain predicament. Tendencies towards viewing video have changed since the 1970s, not least in terms of the available technology and as a result, the future display and exhibition of media specific video art could be perceived as being under threat. For example, with the majority of the original 1970s video monitors almost extinct, works such as Tamara Krikorian's *Breeze* in particular, pose the question as to whether a contemporary monitor or other method of display would capture its original radiant quality. And from a conceptual perspective as well as a formal one, unless these art works continue to be displayed using the appropriate apparatus, they face a certain crisis of truth in their material validity. When one considers how *Television Interruptions* is only truly realized as an artwork when broadcast, there is an ambiguity in its conceptual legitimacy when it is viewed under different circumstances. It is of course an ambiguity that Hall has sought to address by additionally titling the work, *7 TV Pieces*, and now exhibiting it as an installation involving 7 monitors. But with time, as analogue video technology all but fades, the ideology of medium specificity threatens the sincerity of these works being exhibited on contemporary formats. The migration of these works onto digital media may be a perversion of a once integral philosophy, but the imperative of preserving the work poses the distortion as a necessary evil. Nevertheless, the validity of the medium specific concept is somewhat strained, especially if one considers Hall's renowned statement 'Video Art is video as the artwork', and feels obliged to add the postscript, 'but now in digital'. In this sense, one might feel that certain pieces like *This is a Video Monitor* and *This is Television Receiver* seem typical of the

demise of medium specificity's reign over contemporary moving image practice. In the same way that *Television Interruptions* by necessity require the framework of broadcast television, unless *This is a Video Monitor* or *This is a Television Receiver* are actually displayed on an appropriate video monitor or television set with a 'curved glass surface', there is a certain sense of crisis in the validity of the works' circumstantial monologues.

But, in revisiting these particular works, one might also view them as actually prophetic of the demise of medium specificity. The insistence that 'this' *is not* what it seems, but actually a video monitor, seems somewhat sympathetic to the displacement of the technological specificity. Furthermore, it is a reading of the work that potentially reveals a sense of tragedy in the emphatic nature of the monologues delivered by the 'apparent' figures. In this case, one might also recognize an underlying irony in Hall's encouraged deterioration of the video image that pertains to a sense of existential ambiguity, one that could now indicate a knowing premonition of the demise of video as a medium itself.

Although video specificity was clearly a dominant force behind much of the early practice, it was not without its controversy. In his essay, '*Int:Ventions: Some instances of confrontation with British Broadcasting*', the artist Mick Hartney likens video specificity to a metaphorical straitjacket strapped around the artistic practice (Knight, 1996 p.6). Envisaging that new and emerging technologies would 'offer an escape' from its stranglehold, his position can be summarized as a critique of Hall's conceptualization, and a refusal of the proposal that what constituted video art depended on a static state of the medium. In the sense that technologies are constantly in flux, there is some validity to this argument. The feeling that new and emerging technologies might offer an escape can be read in a number of ways, not least that, technologically, new media tend to dictate the death of older media in a more formal, usability sense. But it could also be read as arguing that a focus on the specifics of one medium is likely to limit the novelty of an artistic effect to the temporal fragility of the exclusively current technological 'state of the art'. Given that Hartney goes on to indicate the emphasis on technology at the expense of 'the panoply of devices – tension, relief, surprise and sensory appeal – which elsewhere

constitute time-based arts' one might understandably presume that in a formal approach to video, the reductive nature of medium specificity is, at its most fundamental, solely a study of the technological potentialities or limitations of one medium when compared to those of another. So, not surprisingly, in a study of a medium's limitations, it is unsurprising that a contradiction should exist in the presentation of a self-referential artwork that stresses the ineptitude of its technology, on a digital format more than capable of challenging this incompetence at the flick of a button.

Yet paradoxically, there is in defiance of this, the potential for a counter argument here. In an age of media convergence, the perception that digital technologies have the potential to replicate the imagistic qualities of video and challenge the resolution of film comes with a resignation that any sculptural or material properties of moving image slip further from grasp as the gradual omnipresence of digital code replaces any prior sense of moving image physicality. The concept of materiality in digital media is still a study, which eludes a clear definition. It follows from concepts, which can be indicated most notably in the language of film, as the study of the medium beyond the conventional language of the frame. It is a way of drawing a viewer's attention to the apparatus of the projector and the filmstrip itself, which in its scratching or smudging of emulsion identifies a malleable materiality. With video and digital media however, the notion of materiality is largely dominated by the distance an artist finds themselves from their tangible properties. For artists working with video installation, it could be said that the monitor typically highlighted this distance. Similarly for artists working with digital media, where media is edited on computers, there is still the distance between the artist and any material or physical properties¹⁸. Unlike the more accessible material properties of film, the video monitor encased the image behind its exo-skeletal glass screen, leaving the artist at a restrained distance from the material. Sean Cubitt's analogy to a musician's proximity to the strings of a piano compared to those of a guitar (Cubitt, 1993, p xii) is a fitting comparison to the sense of

¹⁸ In this sense the experiments of the early video practitioners may prove a valid template for issues concerning materiality in digital video installation, particularly if its projection remains aligned with the more predictable conventions of cinema.

control or contact that an artist might have over the material properties of analogue video compared to those of film. So for the media specific video artists, the exploration of this vestige of materiality formed a particularly inviting prospect with Nam June Paik's early experimentations with magnets held to monitors probably amongst the best known¹⁹. In Britain, David Hall's *Vidicon Inscriptions* (1975) indicate the related interest amid British practitioners. In this interactive installation, the viewer approaches a monitor through a custom-built, enclosed corridor where their motion trips a sudden flash of light. A closed-circuit vidicon camera captures the suddenly brilliant image. On the screen of the monitor are a number of gradually fading, still images of people caught in momentary gestures. Each image gradually fades away until the viewer is confronted by his or her own frozen, yet fading video image. The spectacle is conjured using a photographic camera style shutter device covering the lens of a strategically placed Vidicon Camera. Basically the technological reverse of the conventional cathode ray tube, the Vidicon-Tube suffered the major failing of being susceptible to an afterimage. This afterimage can be most easily described by comparing it to the act of looking at the sun or a bright light, and how the light burns onto one's retina, creating a negative image, or a black spot. In industry terms, this was an entirely unwanted property. Given the Vidicon-Tube's absolute vulnerability to this, if a Vidicon Camera was pointed at a light source for too long, the tube actually burned out. Unlike human eyes however there was no healing process. It is through this otherwise unwanted property of the early video camera that Hall exposes an example of materiality to the medium. When the shutter device is opened the image of the viewer is burned onto the camera's tube, which is then relayed onto a monitor, resulting in the multitude of ghostly figures. *Vidicon Inscriptions* suits a certain study of materiality given that image-burn on the photoconductive surface of the tube is the actual manipulation of a physical entity. But the condition is subject only to the specific camera technology, and so as if in a realization of Hartey's skepticism, the long-since ceased industrial manufacture of the Vidicon Camera means that not only the contemporary exhibition of the work is difficult, but its status in a canon of study recognizing the materiality of video is also limited to a acknowledgement of the

¹⁹ Such as *Magnet TV* (1965)

technological state of the art. With its emphasis on the camera, *Vidicon Inscriptions*, is an exposition of the technical aspects involved in creating the video image, exposing materiality in the recording process rather than in its eventual display. But while a filmstrip may be manipulated even as it passes through a projector, the comparable sense of control a video user has is a lot less palpable. Ultimately, it must be acknowledged that this is because the materiality of video is at its core, a signal rather than a series of visible frames. It's something, which Peter Donebauer's Videokalos work is testament to. As Chris Meigh-Andrews points out, the Videokalos was a technology that granted the user an opportunity to manipulate the image within the video-field in a way that had some resemblance to that of the optical printer used by experimental filmmakers (Hatfield, 2006, p.115). So, if one refers back to David Hall's *Television Interruptions*, because of its eventual broadcast and reception as a video signal. It follows then, that one might assume that the only true specificity of the medium is at this fundamental level, and so, beyond the physicality of the monitor, we might see the manipulation and interruption of the signal as the closest indication of video's malleability.

An initial reading of Hall's *This is a Video Monitor* recognizes an engagement with the material properties of video, through the monologue that emphasizes the physicality of the original screening format. Because it is so particularly dogmatic in its specificity, it may seem ridiculous screening *This is a Video Monitor* on a more contemporary format, let alone as a projection or even over the Net. With *This is a Television Receiver*, the specificity seems even further detached from Hall's original concept given that the work should really be broadcast. Further to this is the deterioration of the image, and therefore the message. This deterioration can be understandably read as an exposition of the material properties of the original medium. Hall's reduction of the image to a blur exposes the construction of the otherwise ethereal image, and thereby undermines the expected language of television. But in revising this work as digital, one predictably finds a criticism in its technological specificity, most particularly since its dictum refers to a different technology from that of its essence. Furthermore, it is also facing crisis as to the cultural status of the

medium; particularly as to whether the original authority with which television specific works questioned the language of viewing can still challenge a contemporary audience, any more than the once authoritative figure of Richard Baker still has the cultural resonance of the BBC's hegemonic role in British culture of the 1970s. It would seem that the predictive criticism of Mick Hartney has been realized. In its technological specificity, "the state of the art" has most likely been overshadowed, and the truth-claims of the works no longer hold any validity.

So what of the prophetic quality of the work? With reference to Hartney's position that media specificity inclined some video art towards a "predetermined process" at the expense of "tension, relief, surprise or sensory appeal," (Knight, 1996, p.6) early 21st century reflection on these works typifies the limited 'state of the art'. But despite this, there is the possibility for a further reading, which transforms the decline of specificity into an existential reflection. In a rather tragic manner, the work transcends the rudimentary formalism that exposes the language of video and television. Instead, the work offers a more human reflection that maintains a level of artistry far beyond the staying power of the technological state of the art. This reading is articulated through the personification of the medium, most obviously in the use of the figure.

Consider the woman's face in *This is a Video Monitor*. The monologue describes what it is not: a woman. It indicates the physicality of the monitor as a simultaneous container and distributor of the message; and the deterioration of the image articulates a further construction of the image. But it is not a woman. Already there is an existential conflict in the work. The assumption that the viewer reads an image of a woman as a woman, is more than likely to do with the language in which a viewer chooses to engage with the received information, whether it is through a narrative construct or the pseudo-conversational manner of television. Nevertheless, there is still something provocative in using something as symbolic as a face, particularly when the face not only denies its very existence, but is then subsequently erased. Whether a viewer actually believes they are viewing a woman or not is a debate for another day, but nonetheless, like throwing darts at a photograph, Hall's scrubbing out of the

woman's face and voice is a heavily symbolic gesture. This gesture extends to Hall's use of video materiality via an act of exposition through deconstruction. In the desire to reveal the essence of the medium, i.e. the signal, Hall finds it necessary to deteriorate it. In deteriorating it, Hall is revealing a form of physicality to the message. The personification of this use of materiality allows a physical presence to the figure, and in granting it this presence Hall exposes it to the conditions of ageing. This crisis is enhanced with the wane and ebb of the monitor itself. In its projected state, the work is either read retrospectively, or as nonsensical. But what if the deterioration were to represent the demise of medium specificity – the essential concept with which the work engages? In this sense, we find that the work never really provided any definitions in the first place. Despite initially seeming to promote the dogmatic reductivism of video into an apparent one-lined modernist theme or statement, the deterioration in the work proposes a conflict, which counterbalances everything in that initial reading. This existential conflict in the work, the demise of its own self-realization, is metaphorical for any human crisis, where deterioration and death are the only known constants. And so, with *This is a Television Receiver*, we see the same crisis taken to another level where the newsreader, Richard Baker, once so authoritative in his iconography, strains against his immanent obliteration; with each rewind and replay marking a poignant recognition of aging and increasing irrelevance. In dogmatically exclaiming, "This is a Television Receiver", before actively deteriorating it, Hall seems fully aware of the fragility of such a claim. In the face of its immanent demise, the claim is defensive. This premonition of inevitable defeat raises the work beyond that of a mere challenge to the language of the medium, and humanizes it. It is a humanization that not only indicates the vulnerability in this work, but in the whole of video specificity as an ideology. In doing so, the work transcends its original interpretation as a challenge to the vocabulary of 1970s video, forging an analogy that is not only relevant to the demise of the technological state of the art, but that is also sympathetic to human susceptibility.

Although not necessarily manipulating or engaging quite so directly with the materiality of video as Hall, there are other works of this period into which one

might also recognize this prophecy as a specificity. Madelon Hooykaas and Elsa Stansfield's *Running Time* (1979), is a work that draws its inspiration from the scan-lines of the video image. The title '*Running Time*' has a versatile meaning, focusing our attention towards the video field that constantly renews itself through these lines that imperceptibly realize the video image from left to right. This is set against an image of a figure running, snaking from distance, across a landscape towards the foreground. Before the figure reaches his destination, the image is cut and the figure is seen repeating his attempts with the same Sisyphean futility. Of course the 'running time' also refers to the work's actual duration. Installed in a gallery, the tape would have been set on a loop making a point of video's technological ability to rewind and replay. Initially this might be read as a kind of celebration of a perpetual image, but even on this apparently closed circuit, there is the inevitable break. As the tape ends, the video apparatus is realized as a necessary requirement for the tape to be rewound, replayed, and effectively sustained. The figure's attempts may be perpetual, but the tape is not. Meanwhile, the soundtrack is that of a thumping heartbeat, to which *Running Time* makes the more considerate juxtaposition to the ultimate lifetime of one's own body.

As an artist initially working in the 1980s, Lei Cox's practice has traversed video technology and now resides in that of digital media. His use of each medium is in the manipulation of images of his own body to create fictional characters such as *Lighthead* (1987). A sperm-like figure with a light bulb for a head, the character swims around the empty black, illusionary video-space within the monitor. His work is an example of installation video art where the actual dimensions of the monitor or the edges of a projected image, act as boundaries to the illusionary landscapes. What is apparent in Cox's work is the desire to celebrate the possibilities of video when it is disassociated and removed from its status as a recording medium. Instead the content is fantastical: generated from within the medium. In *The Parallel* (1988), Cox plays specifically with this contrast. As the title suggests, *The Parallel* refers to a concept of a parallel universe where things appear exactly the same with the exception of only the slightest difference. In the work, two versions of the same figure walk across a mirrored horizon line:

one is below the line, upside down, while the other is above, right side up. The lower figure is seemingly a reflection of the other, but it soon becomes apparent that this is not the case when the continuity is disrupted and the figure's mirroring footsteps desynchronize. At this point, an obvious temporal and spatial separation occurs. This separation embodies the contrast between the known universe recorded by video and its semi-independent, parallel universe created in video. For Cox, video is a medium that can enjoy a limitless imagination. The majority of the characters in Cox's work are fantastical like *Lighthead*: characters created by video in video, their impossible bodies transcending the recoded image. Yet existentially, Cox's work still recognizes the conflict between a celebration of the medium's unique capabilities and an acknowledgement of its own limitations. After converting the video space into an empty, black limitless void, the *Lighthead* character crashes against the edge of the monitor screen. The figure's transcendence through its metamorphic ability is curtailed by the limitations of the medium in which it exists.

Ironically, one piece that has a particular degree of success in articulating this conflict is Mick Hartney's own work, *State of Division* (1979). It is a work that acutely balances the indifference and apathy of depression through the depiction of a figure that exists as both a human portrait, and a product of the medium. In another monologue describing the medium specific conditions of a message recorded as video, the words narrate a fundamental recognition that these specificities are not only necessary to the figure's own existence, but also represent the ultimate limitations of that existence. In sentences such as 'other people seem so colourful in comparison to me' and 'I feel grey and indistinct, just an insubstantial milky shadow from the past, left running in the future'²⁰ the existential strain is positioned on video as much as the depicted figure. In an ironic sense of spectatorship, the monologue positions the figure as subject to the viewers' gaze with descriptions such as 'It's as though there is a sheet of glass between them and me, that only works one way. They can see me, but I can't see them' before the work ultimately culminates with a lonely self critique, that prophesizes the isolation of both the figure and of medium specific video as a

whole: 'I know they'll just look at me strangely for a few minutes, and switch their attention to something else.'

So as these works are archived in digital form, and their contemporary exhibition appears on flat-screen monitors, while at their essence they exist as digital code rather than as an analogue signal; it is ironic that it may be only in this deterioration that we find the remnants of analogue video. In which case, we might entertain the idea that video's decay is a true specificity. Literally, this decay is somewhat unique, quite different from the artifacts of digital media. In resistance to convergence, and the assumption that digital media can replicate video aesthetically, the deterioration becomes an act of exposition in true specificity. With a subtle policy of preservation not restoration, the migration of this work to digital for the necessity of archive, marks not only their considered preservation, but also the preservation of their deterioration. The decay therefore, reading as a true marker of video's identity as a formal medium. This is despite the assumption that digital media possess the potential for perfect replicability without decay, which would then, rather interestingly, present the possible paradox in digital media's specificity as their non-specificity. But this deterioration is also a cultural specificity. Amid rapid changes in technology, the deterioration reflects the ephemeral quality of the work, both in the time-base of the medium and its temporal existence as state of the art technology. Such an interpretation of media specificity today, will continue to remind us of this existential resignation.

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APPENDICES

At various points over the three years of research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with artists about their work. These three interviews reflect the development of my research and ideas, with each interview marking each year of the research. The candidates for interview were selected with the intention of gaining primary research with regards to opinions, methods and artistic techniques relating to the conceptualization of the tension between material and image.

Interview 1: DAVID CRITCHLEY

“Then there was the one about all the ideas I’d written down in notebooks, but never got round to doing...” Put together over a year of making attempts to interpret jottings about sculptures, performances, films and videos, *Pieces I Never Did* is a basket of work realized in one minute video format, regardless of how inappropriate this relatively new medium proved to be. The original three screen version is now lost, but I might get round to digitally re-making it one day...

David Critchley (1979, n. pag)

In the first year of my research, I interviewed the artist David Critchley with a view to exploring the idea that the medium can be perceived as the performer within an artwork.

David Critchley’s video practice first came to the fore during the 1970s. He exhibited at the Serpentine Video Show in 1975, which is often cited the first major exhibition of artists’ video in Britain²¹ (Curtis, 2007, p.20), as well as being a founding member of London Video Arts (LVA) and 2B Butlers Warf Performance Art Space. In the revised history of British Video Art, Critchley is recognized as an influential figure (Hatfield, 2006, pp. xiv, xv; and Meigh-

²¹ For further citations regarding The Video Show 1975, see the REWIND online database: <http://www.rewind.ac.uk/rewind/index.php/Database> or Luxonline: http://www.luxonline.org.uk/histories/1970-1979/the_video_show.html

Andrews, 2006, p. 55) and his extensive explorations into the language of performative video art set his practice as key works of the Medium Specific Video Art era.

Critchley has described the emergence of his practice through performance as an exploration of his 'personal identity through performance' (Hatfield, 2006, p. 107). In reflection of this, one might then describe the conceptual basis of his work's development into video as an exploration of the 'video medium's identity as performance art' because, although Critchley continued to use his own body within his video work, it is very much 'video', which is the content, the subject and the 'essence' of the art. As he states in this interview:

It is about negotiating between the performance and the performer and the medium. It's not just a recording of a performance being shown, it is actually worked into the medium. It is not just a method of presentation. It is actually the piece. The medium is actually the work (Critchley, 2007).

Perhaps, his most well known work is *Pieces I Never Did* (1979). In this work, three separate screens (originally monitors) count through a series of one-minute clips of Critchley performing, and describing performing, a number of art works, which, as the title clearly indicates: he never did. Most of the works are performance related and include Critchley screaming "Shut Up!" to the point where he loses his voice; hurling himself against his studio wall to break away its plaster surface or having a paint-covered ball repeatedly thrown at his naked torso until he is completely dripping in orange paint. Other pieces are more focused on the actual video equipment, and include a wobbling recording from a video camera balanced on one end of a plank of wood, while at the same time, Critchley's foot – which also appears in shot – precariously acts as its only counter-weight. For each of these 'pieces', there is companion a shot of Critchley, sitting in his studio, talking to camera, describing each performance and explaining his reasons for *not* doing them. This creates the conceptual tension in the work. Although we see each performance enacted, they are only ever realized as an 'art work' when they collectively are realized as the video. In

emphasizing this, and in the process, exploring the performative nature of video as installation, Critchley edits each clip into a seemingly random order. Furthermore, he uses each of the three screens, to collage the pattern of their display. As one screen bellows “Shut Up!” for example, the second might show Critchley pacing up and down his studio, while the third anticipates an image of the camera crashing to the ground.

The result is vibrant collation of momentary actions, which pulse on either screen, through staggered intervals. The video’s performance is a spasmodic rhythm of Critchley’s penetrating screams and hoarse squeals, of his crashes and collisions, and his...; all intermixed and punctuated with shots of Critchley leaning back in his studio chair and affectionately pondering: “But I never did it”.

We start the interview, by discussing *Pieces I Never Did*, which at the time, in 2007, Critchley had recently completed as a digitally re-worked version. I was interested in discussing how the work may have changed through this digital mediation, and whether it might affect the conceptual balance between the materiality of the medium and the content imagery of the work. With respect to the materiality of digital media, an interesting concern that Critchley then raises, is the idea that with DVDs or digital tape, three separate channels will most likely run in perfect synchronicity. Given that an important aspect of *Pieces I Never Did* is the irregularity in intervals between each section across the three screens, it has always been important for Critchley to maintain a lack of synchronicity in the work. With this in mind, he explains why he deliberately added a half-second delay to two of the channels. What is interesting about this, is that it reflects Malcolm Le Grice’s exclamation that digital media ‘seem to defy finding a physical basis for the aesthetic unless this is added through the output technology’ (Le Grice, 2001, p.311), which is also a central concern of this thesis.

In the second half of the interview we discuss *Static Acceleration*. It is important to note however, that when this interview took place, it was prior to the point when I had begun to consider how a sense of identification with the portrayed figure might further enable the sense of tension between the material and the image, both in this work, and with regard to my own developing practice.

Nevertheless, the discussion does reveal some of my early thinking at the time and what it might mean to me as an artist exploring this issue.

INTERVIEW with DAVID CRITCHLEY

By EMILE SHEMILT, 25th July 2007

ES: Yesterday we watched a digitally projected version of *Pieces I Never Did*. At the point where you are screaming “Shut up” and subsequently wheezing having strained your voice, there seemed to be a distortion on the sound which for me seemed sympathetic with the performance. It was as though the outputting speakers themselves were straining. Is that something that you are interested in?

DC: It wasn’t intentional in the sense that I didn’t set out to make that happen. In making that dub to DVD, basically we reedited the piece to work as a 3-screen/3-channel piece to work on one channel of DVD or digital video. So we mixed the sound from the three original channels to be at the right level. Subsequently we copied the result to tape and to DVD. Because that was going through at the same time, some of the levels were set to work for the tape which was a digi-beta tape. It was just run through for the DVD as well. So actually, the level was probably just too high for the DVD recorder hence the distortion, which we think is not there on the tape. It’s not on the computer. So it’s one of those classic art things, a happy accident or maybe not a happy accident depending on how you see it or take it. Sometimes these things work sometimes they don’t. So I’m happy for it to be like that on that particular DVD, but it’s interesting that every time you make a copy, it seems to be a bit different. Every time you change medium, it’s a bit different. So consequently to me, *Pieces I Never Did*, is still a work in progress. Every time it is re-presented it’s different. So that specific effect of distortion in the sound, in a piece that is about losing your voice or going through something to the extent that your voice changes, is sympathetic in the sense that the medium is working in a similar way to what is happening to the performer. That is something that *Pieces I Never Did* is about. The whole piece plays with those ideas of realising the proposals, which I never did of course. Often they were quite big pieces of work, quite long pieces of work and quite extensive pieces of work, but they have all been realised in one-minute segments on video. So immediately, there was a technological constraint on how they were going to be realised. So very much, the work is about negotiating between the performance and the performer and the medium. It’s not just a recording of a performance being shown, it is actually worked into

the medium. It is not just a method of presentation. It is actually the piece. The medium is actually the work.

ES: What I find quite interesting is looking at different types of media and how they each contain their own idiosyncrasies and distortions. So it's interesting seeing the work remade into a digital format, with three channels in one: something, which might be considered to be a digital aesthetic. Nevertheless, this version of *Pieces I Never Did* still contains a very identifiable video aesthetic.

DC: In a sense, we had to recreate that video aesthetic, certainly in setting the piece up to be single channel, with three separate channels within it. When I originally set up the piece as a video installation with three separate channels on three separate video decks, there were countdowns and colour-bars at the beginning of each tape, which allowed me to synch the decks, and then physically press the start button at the right point. However, it's not my intention that they should run in exact synch. In fact they run out of synch. When we were working with analogue media, as the piece was originally made, you could set them up exactly in synch at the start, and they would run out of the synch by the end. It was because the analogue media was not locked. Whereas, changing it to digital media, even digital tape, it tends to run 'bang-on' in synch. It stays in synch and DVDs stay in synch. So actually now, the countdown is almost irrelevant because you could actually put everything back to the start, fire a remote control at all three decks and they will all be in synch. But then they will stay in synch, so actually, I've had to edit in some analogue video gaps or time differences. Now on the three screens version, or the *Three in One* version, as I'm starting to call it, you actually see the countdown set up, but it's artificial. We actually timed each set of bars and countdowns to stop as they would do with three separate decks and then restart in synch – but they are out of synch by about half a second, which we intentionally put in there. So the piece then continues to run absolutely in time for the rest of the piece but each channel is half a second out. We made that choice because otherwise certainly we would lose that ambient sound and the sense of movement, which is enhanced enormously by just that slight gap. It just creates the space. If they were all running 'bang on' in synch, it wouldn't work because it would be like they were the same thing.

ES: There is a sense of rhythm to it.

DC: Exactly and that's again part of the whole point to the piece. You put down an idea or you put down three ideas and the way that they work together enhances the idea way beyond its original single intentions. So

again, it is finding within the medium the 'space' where the 'art' happens. It's the difference between it just being a mechanical repetition of something in speech or an action or whatever, and actually pulling it apart and allowing it to have a little resonance literally with other movements and other sounds. It creates a whole other thing. That's the creative act. It's in the difference, rather than the thing being the same.

ES: What I liked about it was that the sound became almost physical because you were very aware of the left and right channels. So you can hear the right screen to the right and the left screen to left. It almost becomes a physical experience.

DC: Yes, we intentionally made it with a stereo mix, with the left screen to the left, the right screen to the right and the central screen on both channels so you get it in the centre. So again, it is an artificial re-creation of that sense of space because that is what the piece is about.

ES: With regard to some of your other work, you have made work very specifically for monitors. Would you still want to maintain a sense of purity by only showing them on monitors?

DC: I'm happy either way. David Curtis, for his show, *A Century of British Artists Film and Video*, at Tate Britain, he picked a piece of mine called *Triologue*. It is a work with three heads. It starts with one head and then two heads and then three heads reciting a text split into three sections, but in a linear way, so in the last section you end up with the whole text. It's a black and white piece with talking heads. In that show, it was projected as well. Again, I thought it worked really well. Ok, we made them for monitors at the time because that was all we had, but I have to say, I preferred it large as a projection. You could sit and contemplate it and visually it was more interesting.

ES: That piece would probably work quite well with stereo sound as well, because the heads appear from left to right.

DC: Yes, it would do, although the sound was originally in mono, and unfortunately, now, if it were in stereo, it would just be two channels of the same sound. I still see video as malleable workable 'stuff' that I can continue to work with. Something I should mention though, is the fact that the work was made for monitors to start with because that was all that was available. Video projection didn't exist. Also, there was the

element of scale. I actually made *Pieces I Never Did* for the biggest monitors I could get my hands on which were 25" or 27" at the Royal College of Art. I worked to that as my presentation size and scale. So there are a lot of headshots, because you get a one-to-one reading from life to the image on the monitor. For that reason, the head was used an icon for practical reasons as much as for the fact that it is a head. That was the case for a lot of video work. Now, we can project it. I'm really happy to project it. I'm not a purist in the sense that there are those reasons for why I made it that way in the first place, and I would have no problem showing it that way again. But to show it that way again now, in 2007, is to recreate a 30-year old art work. What I find really interesting as well is to keep working with that artwork. After all it is still a plastic medium in that I can still access and change it. It is still alive. To be able to project it, I personally think is fantastic. It expands that image. There is the whole movement thing. The space and sound are all enhanced. The piece still speaks in the same way. It is still saying the same thing. It doesn't alter the piece in terms of its meaning and my intentions. But it certainly alters it in terms of current day presentation. That is another area that one finds oneself working with. The presentation of the piece is part of the piece. It's still an issue. It's still a live issue.

ES: You mentioned the use of the head as an 'icon'. With regard to your use of the body in your work, do you treat it objectively as a 'body' rather than a person? The body in your work, is it 'you'? Is it 'David Critchley'? Or is it simply a body?

DC: There are some parts that use the body as a thing, as an object. It could be anybody. There are other parts where it is definitely me talking from my own consciousness.

ES: What I am interested in with my research, is exploring a sense of tension between the image and the physicality of the medium, particularly when the image is figurative. Because I am working predominantly with digital video, I am also exploring what might be identified as the materiality of digital media. I think that it is partly a desire to make this somewhat ethereal figure, physical. Or at least to suggest some kind of physicality through what might be described as the materiality of the medium. With film, there is an obvious example of the materiality to the medium in the fact that you can touch it. Creatively, one can explore the use of spilt light or scratch the surface of the acetate, so it has an obvious tactility to its materiality. With video it is different because you don't have that immediate contact, but distortions do happen within it – often because of idiosyncrasies in the medium. At the moment, I am considering how this mediation of an image might form a sense of materiality to an artwork. With regard to your work, and *Static Acceleration* in particular, it could be

said that you are exploring the mediation of the performance through the idiosyncrasies of the medium. But I also think that it is possible to read the work as a mediation of the performer. In terms of there being a sense of tension between the image and the medium, do you think it is possible to attach a sense of meaning or narrative to the work in this way?

DC: Well, you could apply the idea of mediation to anything, ad infinitum. From writing an idea down on a piece of paper to standing up and speaking live. Or from being mediated through a medium like this (points to camera). So while we're having a live interaction now, it is not live when it's down on tape. So at every stage, absolutely every stage, there is an element of mediation happening. Even actually in our live interaction now, there is still an element of mediation happening. There is mediation between what you mean or what you think you mean and what I think you think mean or what I mean. So we're immediately into, at every level, talking about cognition and understanding and meaning. If we're talking about meaning, then we're talking about, "what are you saying?" More and more, as I've got older, and made other work, and as I've made installation-type work, certainly the medical work, like *Cradle to Grave* and other pieces, which are in collaboration with a doctor, they have been about telling a story. They are about something. So you can actually ask, "What is this about?" and you can actually pull it apart in a very straightforward way, in terms of it being a story and a subject. With *Static Acceleration* and a lot of early video art work, you wouldn't normally do that. You wouldn't say, "What is this about?" and if you did ask what it was about, then the answer was, "Well, it's about the medium." That is often what art is about. It is often art about art. It's always about having that conversation with other artists through the work. How accessible that then is to a wider audience is then questionable. I know that quite a lot of work is often not very accessible to a wider audience. I tend to like it more these days when work is accessible to a wider audience. I find it quite interesting to consciously make work that is accessible on some levels; to make work that anybody can look at and get something on some level. They can find it amusing or interesting or even enlightening: just something that they can relate to. There was a time, certainly with the early video work that I made and other people made, when it was all in black and white. It was when structural video art work in the 1970s was actually quite hard work. It's not entertainment and it's not entertaining. It's actually an analysis. It's deconstruction. It's a technical thing. It's an artistic thing in a very specialised way. I think, again, returning to *Pieces I Never Did*, I actually consciously made that piece to be more accessible than the previous video art work that I was making and perhaps that others were making, but it was still within that specialised domain. I wanted to make a piece of work for technical reasons. It was my first colour piece. I got my hands on some colour equipment and U-matic editing. It just made a whole number of things possible and accessible. To have made *Pieces I Never Did* in black and white wouldn't have worked. You couldn't make that piece in black and white. I actually started to

shoot it in black and white and stopped when I realised I could get my hands on colour equipment. It completely transformed the way I approached the piece because you can actually sit and talk to camera and it looks ok. It didn't work that way with the old black and white stuff. So there is the use of colour in the piece. There is also the use of film. There's film in it that's been re-scanned; again it just wouldn't have worked in black and white. So the technical thing is incredibly important in the way that you are able to manipulate your ideas. If you consider the idiosyncrasies of the media, they absolutely change what you can do.

ES: It is interesting that you described video earlier in terms of it being 'malleable', as though the mediation reflects the materiality of the media. When we consider how an artist might use this mediation to manipulate the image and sound almost physically, there is also the consideration of the content of that image. So for example, with *Static Acceleration*, even though you might describe the body as an object or an icon, can it not also be said that each idiosyncrasy of the video medium is also an abstraction and in a sense a physical manipulation of the body?

DC: I suppose my immediate reaction to that is that, nobody would think, "Oh dear, that poor person is falling apart!" It is not like a kid suspending disbelief when watching a movie because we accept special effects as part of the story. In *Static Acceleration* and other pieces, which use the materiality of the medium in order to change the appearance often of a person, it is not done in order to convince you that that person is falling apart in some way. It is done in order to show up the properties of the medium. So from that point of view, a face is a very good icon that we can all recognise. We see it in its pristine form and then we see it change. Because it is a recognisable thing, we can see how the medium changes it rather than how the face itself changes. So as a mediated body, we could be using bottles of water or teacups or something, it's just that it would be less interesting and less accessible. I think it is just that thing of having an icon, something that is a reference point that you can work from in different ways depending on which point of the medium you are focussing on, analysing or using to expressive intent. I think there is a difference. A lot of early video artwork is almost just a pure analysis of what the medium would do. I made an artwork called *Instruction Limitation* for example. It is quite a dull piece of work, but it is just about what would happen if you switch this switch, make that movement there, take that level down or up etc. It is just about what would happen when you do these things. Having made it, it became like a sketch or a study for what to do next. So afterwards I knew it would do this, this and this, so I was able to use it to do that, that and that.

- ES:** It is interesting then to relate that idea to digital media. In digital video installations, one might work with the idiosyncrasies of the media in order to try and provoke certain noise distortions or pixilation, because it is at that point when you realise their limitations. It's that dual idea. Potentially the imagistic possibilities of a digital work are limitless, but it's not tactile. You know it's not real in a tangible sense. But when you get these distortions the image begins to have a structure and an architecture, and maybe, by inference a materiality or a physicality.
- DC:** Often what I find interesting in shots where CGI is being used is when an actor is relating to a CGI figure. The thing that actually flags up the CGI most is the acting. They're not relating to a person, and you can tell. So however perfectly manipulated the medium is, it still falls apart in the interaction between the characters. With hindsight when we look at films from the 50s or the 60s, or earlier when some sort of special effect was being used, it is glaringly obvious what they did. Whereas at the time it was done, it was probably just about believable. You only need to let ten years go by and then look back at what the special effects were ten years ago, it's obvious what it was. It's just the familiarity at the time and it falls apart. A lot of the early video artwork makes that very plain from the start.

Interview 2: MICK HARTNEY

The second interview I have included as an appendix is one that I conducted with the video artist Mick Hartney. Although in this thesis, I do not discuss Hartney's work until the text entitled 'Decay Behind a Glass Monitor', his video *State of Division* (1978) is, nonetheless, highly influential on my own practice and this research.

In this black and white video, the head and shoulders of a figure (Hartney) fade in from a grey background. But before his image appears, his voice is heard describing the conditions of his existence:

...the surgeon who wants to cut me, who wants to divide and analyse me, and who is me, will try to break up this message, to make something grey and special of it. But if you can hear half of this message, then you've got the whole picture. (Hartney, 1978)

Hartney himself describes *State of Division* as 'the rambling statement of a character aware of himself only as a video recording' (Hartney, 2008). And it is because of this awareness (or lack of), that the monologue appears to describe the distance the character (or video) feels from its audience – 'I have this problem that has been bothering me for some time... I feel that I have to tell someone about it, tell anyone. But if I do, they'll just look at me strangely for a few minutes and then switch their attention to something else' (1978).

State of Division is a work that strikes a balance between its medium and its imagery. The artistic tension in the work surrounds the placement of the viewer's empathy when confronted by this monologue. Very soon with *State of Division*, the viewer becomes aware that the monologue relates to the ills of human depression:

I feel separated from them. It's as though there is a sheet of glass, between them and me that only works one way. They can see me, but I can't see them. They can hear me, but I can't hear them. I can only imagine them, like an audience of people listening to me, watching me, waiting for me to do something or say something, so

they can analyse it, criticize it, take it apart. But I can't see them, and they don't say anything. And that's on a good day (Hartney, 1978).

When discussing the work, Hartney reveals that:

In fact the tape was an attempt to deal in a state of tranquility with the experience of period of clinical depression I had had some years before. As I was no longer affected by these feelings, I felt free to deal with them with a degree of humour. The work does seem to have hit a variety of different nerves in its audiences perhaps because of the apparently raw, confessional nature of the script (Hartney, 2008).

In this interview, I discuss with Hartney how this creates a tension in the work. We begin however, by discussing the concept of materiality in video, how it compares with film, and whether (and how) a similar sense of materiality might be understood to exist in digital media.

Reference:

Hartney, M. (2008) State of Division Associated Text, REWIND| Artists' Video in the 70s & 80s, University of Dundee, [online] available at: www.rewind.ac.uk/rewind/index.php/Database

Hartney, M. (1978) Monologue/audio from State of Division, UK, 5 minutes

INTERVIEW of MICK HARTNEY

By EMILE SHEMILT, 4th March 2008

ES: I'm interested in the relationship between the image and the materiality of a medium in moving image art. Recently I have been contemplating the notion of deterioration or decay as indicative of the materiality of a medium, and how I might be able to explore this through digital media. Because of this, one area I am interested in researching is the deterioration of video.

MH: It occurs to me, that some of those elements are more pertinent to film rather than video, for instance the film, *Decasia* by Bill Morrison. What Morrison did was tour lots of film archives to look for often very early film, not always very early film, but usually early film, that was physically decaying due to Nitrus stock and all that sort of thing. He was looking for sections of decaying film, where the decay was not complete. He was looking for sections where there was still an image recognisable on the film, but, it was distorted or textured or fungus had developed, or where the celluloid was breaking down or its coating was breaking down. He was looking particularly for sections where the imagery seemed to be in keeping with that process of decay. The imagery was either in time with it, or somehow correlated with it. He put all the stuff he'd got together without using any special effects or computer effects. He was very emphatic that there was no manipulation of the image. This was exactly how they were. It was just pure optical copying onto safe stable stock. It's beautiful, and it really does deal with the materiality of the supporting medium in relationship to the materiality of the subject, or the immateriality of the subject, and the vulnerability of both. With video it's more difficult, increasingly so, as it recedes from the material. We're told that the HD DVD, or the Blu-Ray, which appears to be getting ascendancy in that High Definition battle, is going to be the last physical medium. That's what we're told. That's it. After that, everything is totally immaterial. It's downloaded. It's just in the ether. There will be no physical medium after that for the storage and conveyance of images and sounds. I find that slightly depressing really, particularly as someone who put some store by actually working with our hands on things.

ES: But there was a distinction between film and video, where video was seen as less material.

MH: Yes, video was less material, but there was a time when there was a vestige left of materiality in video in the sense that you handled the videotape. You threaded it. You put the reels onto the recorder yourself. You could touch the videotape. There were several works made, where the actual handling of the videotape was quite an important part of the piece, for instance in the use of static electricity. A spark of static electricity between the artist or the subject, and the tape, produced a visible effect in the recording. If you look at Nam June Paik's earliest

pieces with videotape, where he is physically manipulating the reels, a bit like a vinyl scratch-DJ, sometimes you see his hands come into shot, and it's really rather magical.

ES: Do you see a materiality with digital media?

MH: No, I don't unfortunately. You've got to deal with the implied materiality of the subject matter and the materiality of the circumstances in which the content is conveyed, i.e. the room that people are watching it in, the people themselves, the light, which is projected is projected onto the screen, any dust particles that light and so on. I was very impressed by Anthony McCall's exhibition at the Sepentine. I was aware of *Line Describing a Cone*. In fact, I hired it once and showed it in the Hall where I teach. I had hints that he was producing more films in that vein, but the exhibition itself was something of a revelation. It wasn't all film. In fact some of it was digital projection. I would love to be able to give my students a process to work with that enabled them the same physicality, in relation to digital imagery as filmmakers, particularly what people like Len Lye, Oscar Fischinger or Norman McLaren had to the film that they were working with: the ability to directly impress images upon the material, the bearer of the medium.

ES: There is some theory that attempts to suggest materiality in video and digital media. Some of it gets to the point where it is all encompassing. Any property that a medium has could be seen as a material property. It's difficult because it can be simultaneously anything and everything. But, it doesn't necessarily have to be a tangible element.

MH: But I think that you lose a direct line at some point. For instance, there is a British artist whom I worked with for many years called John Hilliard. He emerged from that extraordinary St Martins generation, Gilbert and George, Richard Long, Bruce McLean, Barry Flanagan. He emerged from that number of year-groups who studied under Anthony Caro. Anthony Caro was saying, "Well, you can make sculpture out of anything". He was meaning, you could make it out of bronze or steel. You could make out of tin. You could make it out of cardboard or wood. But, they took what he was saying a little more literally than I think he expected. They said, "You can call talking a walk a sculpture. You can call dancing on a tabletop a sculpture. You can call taking a photograph a sculpture. You can call talking to the audience a sculpture." That was a little too much for Caro, but Hilliard began photographing sculptures. He then realised that these sculptures had to be taken apart after they were photographed. The photograph was the only permanent record of them. In fact, it was the only representation of the sculptures that anyone would see. He is associated with reflexive photography. He developed a practice, which used the properties of photography, the focus, the aperture, the blur you get from movement as an element in the subject matter and as means of revealing new aspects of the subject matter. It was a way of implying, something that we take for granted now, that photography is not objective. It is highly partial and everything depends on where you take

the photograph from, how you frame it and how you expose it. I think he had a highly successful practice. It was a very important practice. But at some point he stopped printing the photographs in the conventional analogue way and had them printed onto canvas through a digital process. I think at that point, an indexical line between the subject matter and the final image was broken. It was broken up. You could see that if he was taking photographs on negative film. That negative film was then processed and enlargements were made onto paper. All the time there was a direct point-to-point correspondence between the original image as refracted through the lens onto the negative and the final enlarged image. Once he resorted to digital processing that was lost, and I think something important was lost.

ES: Something was lost but maybe it changed into something else? I don't necessarily mean in terms of things being gained, but rather it becomes something new. Following from the Anthony Caro reference, David Hall refers to his video work as being sculptural.

MH: Yes, well he was a sculptor. He was a minimalist sculptor. He worked with Caro and he exhibited in that important show, *Primary Structures*, in 1966 in the Jewish Museum in New York. That was a very important and groundbreaking show, including Anthony Caro and other artists such as Robert Morris, Tony Smith and Donald Judd.

ES: He took a language that was very sculptural, but at one point he was also taking photographs of his sculptures.

MH: Yes, I can imagine him doing that because he was making particular kinds of sculpture that could be viewed from different vantage points, and to photograph them from different vantage points would have alerted him to the possibilities of film and of these sculptures being seen from a continuously changing vantage point. I don't know, I'm surmising, but he certainly moved very rapidly from sculpture to film and from there to video.

ES: And obviously was a big advocate of media specificity.

MH: Yes, he was a modernist. He was a Greenbergian modernist. He still is.

ES: So when one refers to John Hilliard's photography, where the lens and the lights were all elements of the process, would you see them as being material?

MH: They were fore-fronted elements of the process. They are always elements of the process, but in his case, he gave them stage front.

ES: If that is a clear example of media-specificity in photography, and if we consider David Hall's work as media specific within the language of video art, can we see a similar 'media-specific' language in digital media?

- MH:** Yes, but I think it's less visible. I think it disguises itself very carefully. That is the problem with digital media. It's furtive. It exists behind the image.
- ES:** But we still have pixilation and moments of information 'drop-out'.
- MH:** Less and less so. You almost have to induce it. David Hall did an impressive body of work, and is still doing so. But, if you look at his work, it is almost predicated on the materiality of the bearer of the medium. In other words he looked at television primarily and saw these big boxes, these cuboids, which were the TV receivers or monitors. A lot of his work is predicated on the physicality of the monitor. He uses the monitor as a sculptural element in the work. It hides the image or it obstructs the viewer from the image. He was responsible for establishing a fairly rigorous body of theory in regard to video art, I'll give him credit for that, but a lot of his declarations about video, presumed a static medium a static state of the medium. Video is anything but in a static state. It is forever jumping forward. Before long pieces by Hall, such as *This is a Television Receiver*, which made perfect sense when you watched them on a monitor, were being projected. I first saw that piece projected in 1980. It was nonsense because Richard Baker, his newsreader/actor was describing a situation, which just wasn't there. There wasn't a box with a glass screen on one side, with speakers attached etc. It was gone.
- ES:** That seems to be concurrent with a lot of media-specific work being exhibited today.
- MH:** Well a lot of it falls under 'state of the art produces the art'. Whatever happens to be state of the art available, in the way of technicality, affects the art. For instance in the 1980s, when digital editing was available to individuals and to artists, we got a whole load of tape using slow-motion, fast-motion, backwards all the sorts of things that you couldn't do with analogue videotape easily. It was to play with time, speed it up, slow it down, turn it backwards. Suddenly, you got a whole raft of work, which was backwards and slow and so on. I think that's necessarily part of the process by which an understanding of the medium comes about. But, the medium is constantly fugitive. You can't do the Greenberg thing, and say, "This is what video is about", because by the time you've said it, it's not anymore.
- ES:** Yet, there is an element to both *This is a Video Monitor*, and to *This is a Television Receiver*, where the image and the figure deteriorate.
- MH:** Yes, that's the essence, as I read it, of Hall's intentionality in the piece, which is to strip away the illusion: to strip away the illusionism of television.
- ES:** Which is based on a language by which we view it, but I would argue that there is also the potential for a more existential allegory or metaphor there towards human notions of ageing, deterioration or decay. I'm curious as to how one might use the specificities of a medium as a way of

creating a work that explores something more human, something that is not just about the reading of the medium. I'm asking you this because, with your work, *State of Division*, there is the quote "I'm caught in a chunk of time, snatched out of my time and left to drift in a gallery of people... Trapped in a box inside of a box".²² I think that is a very rich allegory. It is one that can easily refer to human feelings of containment and isolation.

MH: One of the reasons I made *State of Division* was in reaction to *This is a Television Receiver*. It was a reaction against the dogmatism, which I felt was going to delimit, at least, British Video Art, if it was to be exerted successfully. In other words, video artists of Britain were being told by Hall, as painters in New York in 1945, '46, '47 were being told by Greenberg, this is what you must do if you are to come up to the mark as video artists. I was having none of that, partly because it was just, to mix metaphors, painting one's self into a corner. If you took the thesis of, *This is a Television Receiver*, and I use that work because it is the one that I am most familiar with. It is the one, which he used the BBC's resources and Richard Baker, the most famous Broadcaster of the time, etc. He used that authority to give the piece power. What he was saying was, "You think you're looking at a man speaking. You think you're listening to a man speaking, but you're not. You're not looking at a man speaking. It's not a man. It's not a man's voice. It's just an illusion. It's just light. It's just vibrations on a cone, etc, etc." Well, I think, most of us could have worked that out for ourselves. But, even if you take on board the idea that the illusion is revealed, there is nevertheless, I believe, the possibility to make a psychological connection between the person on the screen and the person watching the screen. However indirect that connection might be, however non-indexical that connection might be. Referring back to what I was talking about earlier, it is possible for there to be not only a psychological connection but even an emotional connection. I'm not the only person who shed tears watching John Pilger's Reportage from South Africa. I know that I'm looking at an electro-magnetic recording. I even feel emotional watching ET where I know, not only that this is a piece of celluloid unrolling in a cinema, but that what the camera was trained at, was a piece of plastic being rolled across the floor. I know all that and yet I'm still involved somehow. So, on one level, *State of Division* was about the fact that you could respond emotionally to someone who was not only an illusion, but who was actually telling you he was an illusion. The basic conceit was that this was a videotape cassette found by someone on a bus. They take it back. There are no markings on it. What is it? They put it on and it's like a message in a bottle. It's like something from the future or from the past or from some other parallel universe or whatever. It's from someone who is aware that his only existence is, at that moment, as a recording. It was also about a period some years earlier, where I'd gone through a severe bout of depression. I wanted to deal with it, having got over from it, having recovered from it and having not spoken about it at the time. Having tried to keep it a secret as depressed people do, they feel that this is something that no one should know about, I wanted to

²² Hartney, Mick, 1979, dialogue from *States of Division*

share it. It is odd the response I got. I showed it in New York at the Kitchen in 1983, some years after I'd made it, as part of a mixed showing of British Video Art. A guy came up to me and said, "You really know how we feel here in New York." I told him that I had only just arrived there a day ago, but "Ok, if you says so!"

ES: I think that it is a really successful piece. I find it enormously influential because it works on a dual level. It has that emotional aspect to it. It is a character that is affected by the medium but it is also about the medium.

MH: Yes, but I stress it is a character. It is sort of about me, but it's at a remove. It's me playing a part, and the part is informed by the experiences I'd had.

ES: Going back to the question of materiality, there are certain theories that take the concept to the level of pinpointing 'noise' between differing media that you can't get rid of. There are specifics to digital that like you say, are less apparent, but there is still something there that digital has, that video didn't have and which film has never had. At some point, whether it is just an interruption in the code, the medium will still deteriorate.

MH: But how much control does an artist have over that? Do they just let it happen?

ES: That's another area of interest. There is a quote I came across by Malcolm Le Grice when he was describing *Berlin Horse*. When he refers to the solarization of the image, his statement raises that question of control. By referring to it as working in its own right, he is suggesting that it is a level of materiality that he doesn't have absolute control over.

MH: Sure. I'm not insisting on complete control. But, the materiality has got to be there. You've raised a hair there though. The materiality of the image is something that I would very much like to discover. I talked earlier about being able to work on video like Len Lye, in that material way, where you are actually working frame by frame or in groups of frames and you are able to see the results. We do not have a direct equivalent of that left, where a combination of the material impression and time are combined. Maybe the nearest is the South African artist, William Kentridge, where you do see his manual manipulations. That however, is all done in film. It is done frame by frame in film. It could presumably be done in video, but it wouldn't be quite the same. It has just occurred to me though, that that still exists with sound. With sound, there is still a tangible materiality in that air is vibrating from a speaker cone, and that you are vibrating the elements in a microphone through actions that you take. So maybe it's over there that we've got to look.

Interview 3: GEORGE SAXON

The third interview included in these appendices is an interview with George Saxon. Although initially a filmmaker, Saxon developed his practice to include multi-screen, site-specific installations using film, video and/or digital media. Like the early works of David Critchley, Saxon's first films contemplate the artist's 'body as object'. *Wall Support (Foot to Head)* (1977) for example, is durational performance beginning with a close-up shot of Saxon's boot as he kicks, repeatedly and rhythmically, against a wall. After several minutes the camera pans up to reveal Saxon's body pressed tightly against the wall. The camera then lingers on a profile-shot of Saxon's head, banging against the wall to the same rhythmic pattern as his foot. Gradually the bangs become less rhythmic as his body begins to wane. At this point the wall takes on a different role: its presence transferring from being the subject of his aggression to becoming the only source of physical support that keeps him upright.

During the 1980s, Saxon was a member of an artists' group called 'Housewatch'. The group would stage exhibitions in suburban streets and often utilize houses as exhibition spaces. Multi-screen expanded cinema works typified the Housewatch approach as moving image work was projected against buildings and onto windows as to be visible from the street. Saxon's work during this period included the macabre *The House That Jack Built* (1985), a work where Saxon adopts a gnarled, Dickensian 'Jack the Ripper' persona with blackened teeth and a crumpled top hat. Multiple video projections against the windows of buildings (usually a house) depict a villainous 'Jack' apparently scuttling about the house wreaking havoc amid images of wilting flowers, fire, coffins and babies in cots.

I interviewed Saxon with a view to discussing two of his more recent works, *Escalator* (2002) and *Pixel Errors* (2008). *Escalator* continues Saxon's use of multiple cinematic projections that he originally explored with Housewatch. In this work, made for the Centre of Contemporary Art in Kiev (formally the George Soros Centre for Contemporary Art), looped images of a figure are projected onto two windows of an old monastery. In each image the figure emerges from a confined space, ascending and then descending a small stairwell. His movements

are caught in a repetitive motion, as he climbs endlessly back and forth. As this happens, the shape of the figure begins to change through Saxon's gradual manipulation of the image. In the interview, we discuss how this digital manipulation, combined with the imagery's projection onto the windows of the building, could be considered to address the materiality of the medium. We then discuss the notion of there being a sympathy or tension between the medium and the image in this work.

We begin the interview by discussing *Pixel Errors*, an abstract work made in digital media, and inspired by the structural-materialist tradition. As revealed in this interview, the work initiated with 2 frames taken from a digital video where pixilation had occurred. For Saxon, the work was about considering 'ways in which I could retranslate these two digital video frames and how I might operate and work with them but still maintain some of the same integrity that I would have had when I was optically printing 16mm film or using a contact printer' (Saxon, 2009).

Reference:

Saxon, G (2009) Interview with Emile Shemilt

INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE SAXON
BY EMILE SHEMILT, 26th March 2009

ES: Principally, I'm interested in the influence of Structuralist/Materialist Film on your practice.

GS: The first time I came across Structuralist/Materialist work was when I was a Fine Art student at Wolverhampton in the early to mid 1970s. We were really lucky to get quite a number of artists who were working with film-as-material visiting from London, so I was coming across artworks by people like Guy Sherwin and Steve Farrer who's *10 Drawings* was a seminal piece of work. We were introduced to Structuralist/Materialist film very early on by a filmmaker called Dave Parsons. You can imagine the reaction to this new type of filmmaking a young student would have. I'd only really been brought up on the dominant cinema of Hollywood and hadn't really been exposed to any experimental film and video. Although I was interested in time-based work, it wasn't until I saw Structuralist/Materialist filmmaking that I began to think of film as a medium you could actually work with in terms of looking at its material qualities through actually engaging with the filmstrip and the optical soundtrack for example. It was something I had never considered. It was all a little shocking and new, and I have to say, there was quite a resistance to it from audiences. There still is a resistance to it. When Darryl Georgiou curated *Kinopixel* in Coventry at The Herbert Gallery, the resistance to that kind of work was quite noticeable. It was a show that looked at early structuralist work from filmmakers like Lis Rhodes, Annabel Nicholson and Guy Sherwin through to looking at how this work has migrated in terms of new technologies and the way contemporary artists or media makers are working with structures of the language of digital media. In curating the show, Darryl Georieu put together quite an interesting exhibition. It was quite hard-core though.

ES: When did that take place?

GS: That was shown just recently, from September 2008 to January 2009. We also showed it quite recently at Flatpack Festival in Birmingham with an introductory talk. It was really beautifully exhibited in a large dark space, as single-screen works projected onto a hanging screen. It showed a range of works from early structuralist experiments through to more recent contemporary ideas of structuralist/materialist work investigating aspects of digital media. I became very interested in working with *Pixel Errors* in a way that was reworking two frames of pixelation using the language of structuralist/materialist film adapted for the digital medium. There was also an interesting young video artist called Sam Dunn who did quite an interesting range of experiments. It was almost making a kind of pastiche of the language of materiality in film, translated into a digital form. It echoed the usual things of scratches on film, with various kinds of blips. There were really seminal artists in the show. My history comes

from people like Lis Rhodes, Guy Sherwin, Annabel Nicholson and Steve Farrer, whose works I found highly influential, especially *10 Drawings* and *Silk Screen Film*. They were really seminal at the time. I ended up working at the filmmakers' co-op many years later, which was interesting, so I was constantly exposed to these filmmakers. That all started to change in the 1970s and 80s when people started working with more experimental narrative. The advent of super-8 was very important in that, as were key figures such as Derek Jarman who was quite influential at the time. In term of looking at the way artists were working with film, the fact that you didn't need to shoot film, and make camera-less work was interesting to me even though I didn't pick it up or utilize it at the time. Back then I was more interested in shooting and referencing works through the camera and the lens. For me it became interesting later when I started moving back into that area. I was delivering workshops with people like Vicky Smith who is essentially an animator but in a way that returns to using the film medium. It is something, which I've actually taught at various institutions. I did a camera-less film series of workshops working with film as material. In looking at the materiality of the film, everything involved scratching or painting or printing onto the medium in a way that I believe has always remained a really important introduction to the language of the materiality of the medium. It has been quite key going back to that. It has been really interesting reintroducing it to students because those students would become less interested in the digital. They begin to take a much wider interest in going back to a medium that they would not have generally considered anymore. Kids now don't even understand the language of the lens because with digital cameras it is automatic. So it has bee about going back to three or four hundred years ago and the languages of light, and the way light works and operates. That has been quite key.

ES: So what do you think about the idea of digital materiality?

GS: When working with digital, I think mostly there is a lot of generated imagery. I think sometimes, images are less convincing because you are working with an electronic medium or digital medium, where you are playing with an image. For example, when I did *Pixel Errors* it was two frames that had gone wrong in a piece of work. I started to think about ways in which I could retranslate these two digital video frames and how I might operate and work with them but still maintain some of the same integrity that I would have had when I was optically printing 16mm film or using a contact printer. So I thought about how I might do that using something like Final Cut Pro Timeline for example, and maintain the integrity of those two images by perhaps masking, stretching and reframing. It was a difficult translation because you can't translate from an analogue format through to the digital. It just doesn't work the same. So, you have to re-explore, reinterpret the language of the digital through the computer and how that might work. It is not as easy. You have to re-think the language that you are playing with. For me, it never quite convincingly migrates. I was working with two of Darryl Georgiou's pieces, which were originally from a super-8 footage shot. It was

interesting working with it as super-8 footage transferred to video and then seeing how that might migrate with what were very simple scratches on the film. I think one of the problems was that we weren't showing the actual films apart from one of Lis Rhodes's pieces, where she was printing directly onto the film. I was thinking of Steve Farrer's *10 Drawings*, where the optical was used in the line of the drawing to create the soundtrack, when I began making *Pixel Errors* and decided that I was not going to use any dubbing. There was going to be no dubbing at all. I was just going to use that fragment of sound, which was two frames of sound, with minimal manipulation to keep the integrity of it. I think I managed to do that quite successfully. I think the only thing I did was to enhance the sound quality. That was it. There was nothing else. There were no effects added or anything like that. So in terms of how it migrates to film or how you translate to the digital, it doesn't always work successfully. You've got to re-thing the language in terms of the materiality of the image, which is captured through a camera. The only the other way you could do it is by working through programs like Processer, where you are actually creating something from scratch using the programming language. That's the only other way I can think of in how that might work. You could say it works more on notions around abstract film, rather than just the materiality. Again, structural notions or ideas around structural film, the materiality of something I feel is just more embedded in the language of film although there is an embedding of that language in video or in digital processing, but it doesn't always quite translate. You have to re-think the language that you are dealing with, which is slightly more difficult.

ES: Would you say that that is the point where you get into more conceptual ideas of what materiality is, through explorations of media specificity etc?

GS: That's right, yes. You do get into those ideas, which are much more conceptual.

ES: With your piece *Escalator*, how did that develop?

GS: I was commissioned to do a piece by the George Soros Centre in Kiev. What I like to do is really explore a site. So I went through the history of this particular site, which is an old monastery. I had less than 6 weeks to develop the idea and the piece. I'd just done a series of workshops between Kiev and Chisinau in Moldova, where I was introducing young filmmakers in both countries to various languages of experimental film and artists' moving image work. It was a really successful trip and then they said they would really like me to do a piece. They were really interested in the *Housewatch* work that I did and with that in mind they were interested in commissioning me to do a piece of work. The place that I looked at was a former monastery with these two monastic windows. I was really interested in using them in particular. I'd done a series of explorations around 'The Body' and this was about the third piece I'd done. It was in keeping with earlier works that I had made, which explored the body against various materials. With this piece, I was thinking about Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* and because there

were these two windows, I thought it would be quite interesting to do piece that played with something ascending and something descending. I was quite interested in this idea of visions and religious visions and I discovered that this particular room used to be the sleeping quarters of the monks. Another influence on my practice has been the Prada. I've always been fascinated by the bulk and weight of paintings stacked one above the other and the massive spectacle of the epic in painting. For this piece, I wanted to make something that had an epic feel but was also quite isolated, fragmented and contained within the framework of the space of these two traditionally gothic windows. So I did some shooting, which was initially of figures just moving up and down staircases. Then I started to re-process and re-work it. I started to work and manipulate the image, making it larger and bulkier, changing the frame size of it and then doing quite a lot of compositing with it. Again the sound was really local. The whole sound was actually scratched on video. In fact, the whole thing was worked through scratching. There was no animation on it. It was just multiple layers and composites and fragments of the body appearing. When it was exhibited, it was a looped set up of about seven minutes. It alluded to a number of paintings by artists like Bosch, or even Bacon and their strong references. It just begins with the figures approaching the staircases, one is ascending and one is descending, but they appear to be trapped in flight. So it has this quality of being a slightly nightmarish vision. But it also had a strong reference to this monastic life that these monks were leading, trapped within a religious framework. It also explores sexuality within that. So I was playing around with those notions and ideas. Later, I showed it again it again in Poznan, in Poland.

ES: So the video manipulation is changing the physicality of the piece?

GS: It changes the physicality. It enlarges it. It makes it bulkier and heavier. I was very interested in the way you can really alter a figure. You can make it thinner or fatter. You can really change the shape and size of a body to beyond recognition of the original. I was interested in various forms and how renaissance paintings often had these large cherubic figures and the way these fat angels had this strange presence and dominance. I thought this would be interesting to work and manipulate and play with. You could take one of those frames and really re-interpret them so at some points it feels like a fat moth trapped in the space. It was serendipity as well because I wasn't sure whether the piece was going to work. Unfortunately I didn't install the piece in Kiev, they installed it for me and I left instructions. Nevertheless, it turned out that there was a lot of discussion because the success of the piece was based on the fact that you really felt that there was this trapped figure. Like an angel, this cherubic figure is trapped in the space, trying to either descend or arise with all the illusions to heaven, hell and the purgatory of life. I was playing with those notions.

ES: And it all balances with the physicality of the actual building structure.

- GS:** Absolutely, yes. That was really important. I'm not sure if it worked so well in Poznan. When I initially looked at the space, I was actually thinking about developing a new piece, but then thought that actually I would see how this piece worked. It is really designed to go on two separate windows. What was interesting about its exhibition in Kiev was that it was shown on the windows internally. It wasn't an external viewing. In Kiev, it was shown in situ, and the audience was actually in the original rooms. It was as if a light was actually coming into the room. You weren't looking at it from the outside. You were actually inside. The way it was designed was as a corridor. The projections were from one side of the corridor straight on to the windows. The corridor wasn't that wide either. It was more of a passageway, but it had two sets of windows. We had to block one set of windows out and the only way to see the piece was by going inside the rooms and then being confronted with this light. It was a little bit like a stained glass effect when you enter a church. I was interested in that but without using the structure or the material of stained glass.
- ES:** But at the same time you were using the material of video.
- GS:** Yes, the materiality of video was really important, and the illusions to painting on one level as well, was a key feature of that. I'm probably going to be working on another series that utilizes the body again in different kinds of projections in different spaces.
- ES:** So going back to the Structuralist/Materialist context, historically you began to see a crossover into Experimental Narrative?
- GS:** Yes, I think there was came a point in the mid to late 70s when the Structuralist/Materialist position had, not exactly run its course, but where there was a kind of tiredness when people went back to using the lens to start dealing with image making, not in a Hollywood sense, but in a sense of reinvestigating or returning to the image. With that came a re-thinking or re-looking at narratives, and re-examining what the structures were. There began a kind of home-movie feel as well, especially when you look at works by people like Derek Jarman. At the time, I found his home-movies more interesting than the films he was making elsewhere. There was a re-thinking or return to something that had more and more an emotional engagement rather than a material detachment. It's difficult to describe but there was a migration away from that. I'm not saying that there was a schism, because even some of the Structuralist filmmakers suddenly became interested in how they could re-explore the image. With some Structuralist/Materialist work, there was almost a denial of the image. They would just project frames, which were just literally punctured through light. So it became a kind of re-thinking or re-investigation of looking at the image and asking what is the image.
- ES:** So do you think it is possible to have a balance between Structuralist/Materialist philosophies and something more emotional like experimental narrative?

GS: That's a difficult question. When you say 'balance', what do you mean by that?

ES: Works where the Structuralist/Materialist approach conceptually enhances the imagery or critiques the imagery or visa versa and creates a sense of tension between the two?

GS: I think there is a tension between the two. It is interesting when you think of audiences and how audiences look or think around work. There is a level of expectation, especially with moving image work. Moving image work in galleries doesn't always work because by default the language of film has a beginning, middle and end, and it has a particular cinematic viewing space. Although artists like Douglas Gordon have successfully used moving image in their work as looped installation work there is still this audience expectation of going in and sitting down in a darkened, blacked out space. That's pivotal to what people's expectations of what films are. They think, "I'm going to see a piece of moving image. I'm expecting to sit down and watch an A to Z potential narrative. The structuralist position denies that. I think Darryl did an incredibly, brave show in terms of the way he curated that work. There weren't even any inter-titles. All the titles and credits were put separately. So you were watching these pieces end-to-end. Audiences do find it very difficult when they are expecting to see an image, be it a dog, cat or human being, and they are denied it. There was only a little bit in one of Guy Sherwin's pieces, where a train appears at a station done frame by frame, even then it was abstract. It was playing with light. It was just an interplay with light over time. It's a difficult one though. There has been a real moment of returning to, or re-engaging in Structuralist/Materialist work, which at the time I wasn't that interested in. I was interested in it, but I wasn't interested in emulating or working with it. But it was interesting to go back to it with *Pixel Errors*. It was the first abstract work that I had ever made. There was a sense of enjoyment in not having to work critically with image-making but just working abstractly with pixels, with errors and two frames, which presented other challenges. It was a little bit like having two frames with two scratches across them and questioning how you would re-manipulate that with film through an optical printer by re-printing, layering, doing double multiple printing, which is a really exciting process. So I was thinking about how I could re-work that in digital trying to adopt or utilize some of the same methodologies that filmmakers would have done. My origins were working with 16mm film, albeit through a clockwork Bolex camera. As a student I did some experiments just working with film as material but I wasn't particularly interested in it because I was more interested in working with a camera and shooting an image. The two have a co-existence, but it is an uncomfortable one I think.

ES: Do you think it is possible to have an artwork that balances the two, or intentionally contradicts the two?

GS: I think you can.

- ES:** In that sense I would regard *Escalator* like that, because I see it as a Structuralist/Materialist piece.
- GS:** It is yes, but not consciously. It wasn't consciously a Structuralist/Materialist piece. But essentially it is. I was very interested in the idea of the loop. I could have used two pieces of found footage of somebody walking up and down a staircase. I could have just utilized that, but yes, in many ways I think I was adopting Structuralist/Materialist ideas. I wasn't doing it consciously, but obviously it must have been somewhere at the back of my head. I was playing with printing, I was over-printing, I was using inter-negatives, albeit using digital technologies. So that is a good point actually. I think I was adopting those ideas.
- ES:** And yet at the same time it is an emotional piece of work.
- GS:** Yes, it is. When I think of some Structuralist/Materialist work it is quite cold. There is a distance. You're not seduced. I think it's to do with the lack of seduction. You're not seduced by the power of the image. It can be quite an alienating experience for an audience; although I quite like alienation sometimes.
- ES:** I wonder if it is to do with the body that you are able to identify or empathize more with the image and therefore you are able to apply an emotional meaning to the structuralist situation of the work.
- GS:** Yes, I think you do apply meaning as soon as you have a figure. Landscape is interesting where there is the absence of a figure. But, as soon as you pull a figure into a landscape, or onto a space, there is a different emotional engagement. Even in the physical environment, when there is a figure standing in your view. If there were nobody there, you wouldn't be looking there. But, as soon as there is a figure there, there is a kind of draw or avoidance. Either way, there is a conscious pull. A figure draws you. You pull towards or away from that figure. But there is a particular engagement there that is to do with human contact. If you think of film narrative and the depictions of figures in the use of close ups, it is shots of faces or of figures or bodies. It has become key to filmmaking in a way that separates it from the traditions of theatre with the figure on the stage. I think the most interesting artworks have been those that are denying the absence or the presence of the figure, or you allude to the presence of the something. Working with the body is interesting because so many artists have worked with the body, whether it's their own or somebody else's, or the figure in the space. I'm thinking about people like Nan Golding, the photographer who works with the body, or even Warhol's experiments.
- ES:** With installation work such as *Escalator*, you've got the ambiguity between the presence of the figure and the ethereality of the light. It fits into that whole Housewatch ethos, with presence and non-presence and the reality of a structure, so it has that other layer to it.

- GS:** Yes, absolutely. That layer is there. It is an illusion. It is illusionistic after all. It's not real.
- ES:** But the moment you introduce the figure into an installation work, where you specify the tension between the physical structure of the apparatus or the building and the materiality of the image, the mediation, which occurs, is essentially happening to that figure. Structurally, you have a strange balance between physicality and non-physicality, which includes the physical manipulation of the video medium. *Escalator* has all those multiple layers in it.
- GS:** Yes, of course. *Homo-Cyte* is another piece that I did with Gina Czarnecki originally for Housewatch. Gina and I re-manipulated the work to become a four-body projection. It deals with the sex of the body. Later it became a single channel work. *Pig of Hearts* is another work, which uses the body and the sense of touching other figures. It's based on a kid's game where you are manipulated through space. It alluded to Arthur Rimbaud's life and writing. The whole film is game. The stages take you through a game and then there is the shock of the finale. It's incredibly multi-layered.
- ES:** Is it interactive then, if it is a game?
- GS:** No, it's not. You are led like any film leads you, but in this case, it is like you are consciously playing a game. You're asked to enter the space of a game. Again, though, it is figures and close-ups as well as pigs' heads. There are lots of close-ups of faces. There is the subjective camera moving through a space and engaging with a figure. The figure is invited to touch the other figure. It has multiple layers and multiple meanings right the way through it. The idea of the figure in Structuralist work is interesting because the Structuralist denies the image. Annabel Nicholson's work is quite interesting. You get a hint with her work. It's almost hinting at the image. Peter Gidal's writing around the subject is all based on denial. The denial of the figure, the denial of the body almost has a religiosity to it. I had an incredibly strong reaction against it myself. Fortunately I saw a lot of American work when I was a student. Although they were working with the structures, they were using the image. They used the language of the camera. The show that Darryl did was very strict. The image was scraped down to being almost negligible, which was interesting. What was strange was that the audience that responded to it was mostly young kids and young adults. They would sit there with their headphones on, turn them off and then start listening to the sound. Maybe they didn't like the sound that was coming out, but they were watching the light. It was like fluctuations in a space. I think what Darryl had done in setting up the space was very successful. Because it was just a hanging screen, as you walked into the darkened room, there was a sense of space because there was no back to the screen. Just in terms of the way it was curated and constructed within the space was really quite powerful in the way you were entering the exhibition. What was interesting also, was noticing that people feel very uncomfortable walking into an absolutely pitch-black space, confronted with minimal imagery.

They left very quickly. If you walk into a cinema-space, it is understandable. The understanding is different because you know the framework within which you are entering, but if you walk into a darkened space with minimal imagery it's very different. Kid's loved it, clearly, but anyone that was a bit older seemed to feel very awkward. They would shuffle out quite quickly. I think it had a lot to do with the light and the power of the sound. I think it was also to do with the darkness of something and having to readjust yourself to the space. With the cinema-theatre space, it's different. It's interesting the whole procedure when you enter a cinema. Cinemas are designed so that your eyes adjust to the light very quickly. You've also got a very powerful light source at the front depending on which side you walk into the cinema space. But, to walk into complete darkness, I can understand is quite frightening. We were also very conscious of the playful aspects in making the work. One of the key elements of the Structuralist/Materialist experiments we brought to *Kinopixel* was working with the geometry of stuff. So we were working with clearly defined areas. We were either dealing with light, horizontal light, physical lines, a wiggly scratch or circles, holes or pixels and that was it. We were working with geometric shapes like triangles or squares. And that was it. The whole show was just comprised of that in multifarious forms and that was it.